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ELLEERY QUEEN'S

GAZINE

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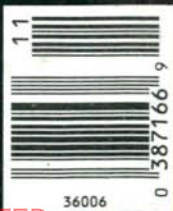
by P. D.
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—the only
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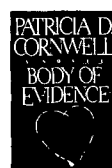
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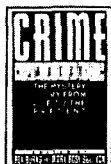
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ISSUE #589—DEDICATED TO ELEANOR SULLIVAN

We at Davis Publications are dedicating this issue to EQMM's editor since 1982, Eleanor Sullivan. Eleanor was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts and went to Salem State College where she received a B.S. in Education in 1950. For ten years she taught intermediate grades, first in Clinton, Connecticut, then Cambridge, and finally White Plains, New York. She moved to New York City in 1960 and worked a variety of part-time jobs as she tried to break into publishing. She began as an editorial assistant with Pocket Books and later became an editor for Charles Scribner's Sons from 1962-1969. Answering an advertisement in the New York Times, she landed the job of Managing Editor of EQMM in 1970. From 1975 to 1981, Eleanor edited Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine in addition to being Managing editor of EQMM. Shortly before the death of Editor-in-Chief Frederic Dannay, she became editor of EQMM.

Edward D. Hoch: "There are so many things I could write about Eleanor Sullivan, a fine editor and a good friend. Most important, in editing EQMM, Eleanor has continued the high standard and perceptive judgment that were the hallmarks of Fred Dannay's editorship during the magazine's first four decades."

George Baxt: "It's about time something was dedicated to Eleanor Sullivan because she could use a lot of dedication. She could also use an ice cold gin martini—with olives. A decade ago, we became great friends and in fact, she is a treasure. I am too, but whatta-hell. I admire her, I respect her, and I love her. And if you've never met her, you don't know what you're missing."

Ruth Rendell: "Nearly twenty years ago Eleanor Sullivan asked me to write a short story for the magazine. I called it "Venus Fly

Trap” and it was the first of my stories to be published. Not long afterwards I met Eleanor in New York and we had lunch. We had so much to talk about and so many interests in common that we lost count of time and found ourselves still in the restaurant when they came to lay the tables for dinner. Since then Eleanor has been one of my dearest friends. She is one of the nicest, cleverest, most charming and funny people I know. I love her very much.”

Clark Howard: “About twelve years ago, when Eleanor began editing my short stories, she pointed out to me that I seemed to have a fondness for underlining in my manuscripts a much higher percentage of words than was necessary.

Underlining, of course, is the writer’s way of emphasizing, in italics, what is supposed to be a noteworthy or outstanding word which the writer feels for some reason should be set above other words immediately around it. Eleanor said that I appeared to think that a really high proportion of my words were entitled to this preferential treatment. She advised me, in the interest of improving my writing as well as reducing her time deleting the underlines, to try and curb the habit. Italics, she stressed, were only for very special words.

I took Eleanor’s advice, and am a better writer for it today. But there are two words I would still always underline:

Eleanor Sullivan.”

As part of the dedication, we wish to reveal a well kept secret. In 1989, “*Ted Bundy’s Father*” (November 1989) received a slew of votes in our annual Readers Award competition and was nominated as best short story of the year by the Mystery Writers of America. Printed as by “*Ruth Graviros*,” the story was actually penned by Eleanor, as was the following tale of crime and punishment. Always modest about her achievements, it took some convincing to get Eleanor to allow us at Davis to honor her in this

way during EQMM's 50th year, but, as our writers and readers will agree, it is well deserved, long overdue, and, despite this story's title, the God's honest truth . . .

LIES

by **ELEANOR SULLIVAN**

“I didn’t know the paper was due today,” Martha told Betty defensively, handing her a note. Betty looked up from the desk at her fourteen-year-old and opened the note. It was from Martha’s English teacher, Mr. Shapiro, stating briefly that Martha hadn’t turned in an assignment due today and he expected her parents would want to discuss it with her.

“How couldn’t you know?” Betty asked. “You haven’t missed any classes this semester, have you?”

“No, I haven’t. He didn’t tell us when the paper was due.”

“Wouldn’t that be a strange thing for him to do—give an assignment without a deadline?”

“Well, he did.”

“How about the rest of the class? Did they deliver their papers on time? Take off your jacket, Martha, you’ll die of the heat.”

“Fat chance. It’s freezing in here—as usual.” The duplex apartment, the top two floors of a mid-Manhattan brownstone, had its charms but a responsible furnace wasn’t one of them.

“And you’re exaggerating, as usual.”

“Then why are you wearing two sweaters and those heavy wool socks?”

“What about the rest of the class, Martha? Did they turn assignments in or didn’t they?”

“Most of them did, I guess. —I don’t think Mr. Shapiro likes me, Mother.”

Betty wasn’t the natural deadpan Martha was, but she was a professional actress, capable of suppressing a spontaneous smile when she chose. “What is the assignment, anyway?”

“Goodbye, Mr. Chips.”

© 1987 by Eleanor Sullivan.

"A book report? What could be easier? It's so short—and you watched it on *Masterpiece Theatre* with your father and me."

"There are eighteen chapters in the book and he assigned each of us a chapter to summarize its connection with the rest of the book."

"Its importance in the life of Mr. Chips," Betty mused. Martha shrugged impatiently, not anticipating the effect it would have on her mother's own patience. "Well, have you started the paper, at least?"

"Yes."

"What's the problem?"

"He gave me the worst chapter. Chapter six. It's the second longest chapter in the book."

"There isn't a chapter in that book that could remotely be considered long."

"Well, it's the second longest and it's saying more than one thing. Most of the other chapters say just one thing."

Betty looked at the clock. "Go get comfortable and then bring me what you've done," she said and Martha went off upstairs to her room, peeling off her down jacket as if the world was too much to bear.

When my love swears she is made of truth, Betty thought, I do believe her, though I know she lies.

The phone rang and she picked up the receiver. It was Jake, saying he would be an hour late getting home. No later than seven, he promised. They were a man short and there was the usual Monday paperwork. Hanging up, Betty returned to the bills she had finally attacked after days of resolution—symptomatic of her increasing problem with time. No matter how well she tried to organize, the unexpected took priority and she was lucky to accomplish a fraction of what she planned.

After writing checks against Jake's last N.Y.P.D. paycheck, she reached their minimum balance—with three sizeable bills that would have to remain outstanding until her check for the television commercial she'd done in the fall materialized—a check she'd been told before Christmas was in the mail, a check she'd been told last week was in the mail.

Martha returned with a dogeared spiral notebook and a copy of the James Hilton novel, set them on the desk, and pulled over a chair. Betty turned to Chapter 6. There were a few lines over eight pages to the chapter, which she reread while Martha frowned over her notes. But her mood was lifting—they were coping.

When Betty finished the chapter, she looked over at Martha's open notebook. "Is this what you wrote on the chapter?" Martha nodded—and listened and watched as Betty read it aloud.

"When Mr. Chips married Katherine he was happier than he had ever believed possible. And in his happiness, he changed from a rather pedantic, conscientious person (schoolmaster?) to a more confident, forward-looking, inspiring (stimulating?) man (schoolmaster?), who came to be loved by his boys."

They looked at each other. "It reads very well to me," Betty said. "When did you write this?"

"On the weekend."

"Then why didn't you type it and pass it in? Does he want something longer?"

"He said it should be as long or as short as it needed to be."

"Then *you* don't consider it finished."

Martha scowled and pulled the book over, turning it until it fell open naturally onto pages 36-37. "There's all this here about his jokes and how he learned to make the boys laugh."

"Lex Canuleia, yes. Remember that was written on the blackboard in the introduction to the three episodes on P.B.S.?"

"Yes—that's why it has to be important. But I didn't get it then and I don't get it now."

Betty read aloud, from the book this time, in her pleasant diction, about Chips' one joke that never failed to please. "Whenever Chips' Roman History forms came to deal with the Lex Canuleia, the law that permitted patricians to marry plebeians—" Betty looked up. "You know what patricians were?"

"The aristocratic families in Ancient Rome."

"And plebeians?"

"The common families."

"All right—when Chips taught about this law that was passed to permit patricians to marry plebeians, he'd add, 'So that, you see, if Miss Plebs wanted Mr. Patrician to marry her, and he said he couldn't, she probably replied, 'Oh, yes, you can, you liar!'" Betty looked from the book to Martha. "'Roars of laughter.'"

Martha didn't roar with laughter but her face reflected relieved understanding and she closed both books and stood.

"Why did that confuse you, do you think?"

"The Latin, I guess."

"We don't have a Latin dictionary, but maybe Lex Canuleia is in the Webster's Unabridged."

"I'll look it up." Martha started toward the door. "Lex must be 'law.' Maybe it means 'common law.'"

"No, that's *lex scripta*—the unwritten law."

"Pardon me." Martha was at the stairs.

"Are you going to include this in your summary?" Betty called after her.

"Yes, at the end. To play up the importance of a sense of humor in the classroom!"

Betty opened her mouth, then closed it. She put the checkbook away in a side drawer of the desk, stamped the bills going out for payment, and propped them between the stapler and the Rolodex. She went to the window and looked down at the early home-going traffic in the failing light on Forty-eighth Street. The days were beginning to get longer again, but it still seemed like the dead of winter. Ugly Duckling time of year. She started toward the kitchen to begin dinner, stopping to turn on lights as she went.

Peeling vegetables, she tried a new approach to the lines she'd memorized for a trilogy of one-act plays that was going into rehearsal next week. The one in which she played the lead was full of possibilities that excited and frightened her. And the director was an unknown quantity—a young Russian with a big reputation whose first work in the U.S. this would be.

Oh, yes, you can, you liar.

"Liar!" Stella Adler had roared at her in an acting class twenty years ago—that time meaning there was no truth in the performance Betty was giving. Weeks later, toward the end of the same term, when Betty and a classmate finished a scene from *The Children's Hour*, Stella had risen, walked regally over to her, and embraced her. "Liar," she'd purred—meaning Betty had learned how to separate herself from herself and become someone else.

Martha tripped down the stairs at that terrifying pace of hers and headed straight for the refrigerator and a Coke. "I smelled the pot roast," she said. She loved pot roast.

"You were in luck. I ordered lamb and Louis sent the wrong thing."

"What a sweetie. As long as he doesn't charge you for it."

"Honest Louis? When he phoned to tell me he made the mistake and was sending Ken over with the exchange, I said the pot roast would be fine and he said he'd be sure to deduct the difference on our tab."

"Isn't Dad late?"

"A little. Have you finished the assignment for Mr. Shapiro?"

"All done."

"Get it to him first thing tomorrow. And apologize."

"I will, I will. —Wouldn't you hate Dad's job?"

"I don't know. Aside from its gruesome aspects—"

"The stuff he sees. He must feel like blowing chow half the time."

Betty paused in her scraping and looked across at her daughter, who raised her eyebrows as if to ask, "Did I say something?"

"Do you want to help me with these vegetables or set the table?"

"I'll set the table."

"Wine glasses for your father and me."

"Sure." Martha placed her glass, containing only ice cubes now, in the sink. "I'd hate *acting*, too. The hours stink."

"So does your vocabulary, my darling."

"How did I get so lucky with both of my parents working flaky hours?"

"Consider yourself lucky to *have* two parents."

"Don't," Martha warned.

"Who me?" said Betty. "I never lecture."

"And I'm queen of the soaps. Hey, that's an idea. Why don't you get a role on a soap? The hours are so much better. *And* the pay."

"And the lines are so much easier," Betty said wistfully.

"Is this part going to be so hard?"

"I won't really know until we start rehearsals. I have to deceive the audience all the way through that I've just arrived at a drug-rehabilitation center when actually I've just been discharged. I come to the lobby with my suitcase to check out as the new arrivals are checking in and they assume I'm one of them."

"And you go along with the misconception?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Complicated reasons. A desire to proselytize. Exercising a new feeling of power. Dirty reasons and clean."

Martha considered. "Nice premise."

"Thank you," Betty said.

After dinner, Martha went off for an evening of hair-washing, telephoning, and homework. Jake brought his dishes to the sink and kissed the left side of Betty's nose. "I'm going to watch the news," he said.

"Brave man."

"I'm making a drink. Want one?"

"Maybe later."

He poured himself a bourbon on ice and went to the living room. It was understood that she did the dishes the days he worked, he did the dishes the days she worked, and Martha did the dishes the days they both worked. Betty heard the sound of the TV come on, and as the news team went through its paces, trying to address the truth as filtered through the White House and the rest of the world, she lost herself in her own thoughts, sudsing, rinsing, wiping, putting away. Beyond the kitchen window, half a block away on restaurant-lined Second Avenue, fireworks rattled and popped a welcome to the Chinese new year. In the living room, a young TV spot-reporter at the scene of a hit-and-run announced that the victims were "an elderly couple, fifty-six and fifty-seven years old." Jake had turned forty-six in July and she would be fifty in October. She heard Jake groan and she laughed. "I'll make myself that drink now," she called in to him.

When she joined him in the living room, he was leaning back in the lounge, deep in thought, the television off. She curled up in the chair across from him and considered the Christmas decorations that should be taken down and stored away. "A penny for your thoughts."

"A new case today's got us puzzled."

"Tell me."

"Well—" He took a drink. "We had a call about eight-thirty from Joint Diseases. A twenty-two-year-old kid named John Rivera was found bleeding to death on the street a block away with a knife wound in his arm. We had an alert out for his attacker when about ten o'clock we got a call from a hotel three blocks north of the hospital that an overnight guest, male, had been discovered stabbed to death in his room—wearing only socks and a turtleneck shirt. He'd checked in with another guy around midnight and the other guy was gone."

"Rivera?"

Jake nodded. "The dead man paid for the room and signed in under a false name, but the ID in his wallet checked out. His father—who hadn't seen him in two years, since throwing him out of the house in July 1985—identified him at the morgue."

"How old was he?"

"Thirty-seven. From Queens. He worked as a billing clerk for the phone company. —Jimmy and I went to the scene. A fleabag. The clerk was illiterate—Parsons could have signed in as King Kong and it would have been the same to him. There was only the bed in the room—no closet, no dresser. The walls were a bloody mess."

"Literally."

"Yeah. We went from there to Joint Diseases. Rivera was just coming alive after surgery. The doctor said they were lucky to save his arm. We got in to talk to him, though. He's bandaged from here to here—" Jake chopped his right shoulder and fingers with his left hand— "And he's groggy, but alert, too, you know?"

"He admitted spending the night with Parsons. They met last night for the first time at the Eighty-sixth Street stop on the Lexington Avenue line. They got talking and when he told Parsons he had no special plans except going home, Parsons said he'd rent them a room, they could bring in takeout and talk. He was into this witchcraft cult—there was a paperback about it in his tote bag—and he was hyper about it. Rivera said he went along because he was lonely and hungry—he's unemployed."

"Go on." Betty leaned over and turned on the radio, very low.

"So they brought in some Chinese food and talked and then they fell asleep."

"Oh?"

"Right. He says they were bombed when they met—they'd both been doing the bars on Eighty-sixth."

"So then they woke up."

"Rivera says it was showing light at the window when Parsons woke him. Rivera still had his clothes on but Parsons' pants were off and he wanted Rivera to do stuff Rivera didn't want to do. When Parsons started to get rough about it, Rivera dove for this knife Parsons had showed him in his tote bag the night before and tried to get out of the room by defending himself with it."

"I hate this," Betty said.

"Parsons tried to retrieve the knife and they battled it out until Parsons went down for the count."

"And Rivera took off."

"With the knife, yeah."

"Parsons' knife. Have you got it?"

Jake nodded. "Exhibit A in The People versus John Rivera, if it comes to that."

"Why would he go to a hotel with someone he just met if he didn't expect sex?"

"Money."

"For payment, you mean—or to roll him. Did Rivera have much money on him when they picked him up?"

"Less than two dollars in change."

"What about Parsons?"

"Zilch. His pants and his tote bag and everything from the bag were on the bed—but there was no money there or anywhere in the room."

"Nothing?"

"No."

"That's worth thinking about."

"It's exactly what I was thinking about when you promised me a penny for my thoughts."

"And Parsons paid for the room."

Jake turned up the sound a little on Benny Goodman playing Copland's *Concerto for Clarinet and String Orchestra*. "He paid, all right."

"The room clerk may not know how to read but he must know how to count money. Did he find the body?"

"No. The cleaning man saw blood in the hall and traced it to the room."

"One of them could have taken Parsons' money."

"I'm not sure we'll ever find out what happened to any money he may have had left after paying for the room, but Rivera says he killed him unintentionally, in self-defense, with this knife we have. It's the claim of self-defense I'm trying to come to terms with."

"But money could be at the bottom of it."

"It probably is. Parsons might even have ripped off Rivera, and the desk clerk or someone else who was in that room before Jimmy and I got there ripped off Parsons."

"Wouldn't Rivera have told you if Parsons had ripped him off?"

"Not if he decided to plead self-defense."

"You think he's lying, then."

Jake reached for his bourbon. "I'd rather hear what you think."

The sane, sweet music was the only sound for a while, then: "I want to believe him," Betty said.

"I suppose I do, too. He says he's no killer. And that cut on his arm was lethal."

"Could he have inflicted it on himself?"

"I doubt it."

"What kind of knife is it?"

"An ordinary street knife."

"Would someone carry a knife like that in a *tote bag*?"

"I suppose someone might but I've never known it to happen. Usually they tuck them in their waistband."

"What do you think, Jake? Do you think he's lying?"

"About something I can't put my finger on, yes, I do. He's younger and more agile. He stabbed Parsons at least a dozen times. I don't think that was necessary for self-defense. And Parsons died on the floor on the far side of the room from the door. I'm pretty sure the knife belonged to Rivera, not Parsons."

"What about drugs?"

"We don't have an autopsy report. If Rivera had any traces, they didn't mention it at the hospital."

They listened to the end of the second movement of the concerto, Jake half absently fingering the notes, pinning the last one midair with his index finger.

"We're so lucky, Jake."

He rested his head back on the recliner and thought. "To die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier."

"For poor Mr. Parsons, maybe."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

The bedside clock read 8:10 when Betty woke to the by-no-means-routine sound of Jake singing in the shower.

"Humday I'm going to murder the burglar/Humday they're going to find him dead/I'll hamputate his reveille and step upon it heavily/ And hend the rest of my life in bed." By-no-means routine and she'd never heard him hum this one before, however much he hated to get up in the morning. He probably wasn't even aware of what he was humming, if he knew he *was* humming. Betty turned luxuriously to face the window. The subconscious mind.

Yesterday morning around this time, the act was being played out by those two men, Rivera and Parsons, or had been played out in that bare and bloody room uptown, and Parsons was dying or already dead. Rivera stumbling away with the knife, Parsons collapsed on the floor with no pants on, just socks and a shirt. She pushed her thoughts of them away. Time to get up and dressed and—

"Jake?" She sat up in bed. "Jake?"

The bathroom door opened partway and he stuck his head out, toweling it. "What's up?"

"Me in a minute.—Jake, your murder yesterday."

"What about it?"

"Parsons was getting dressed. He'd been undressed and he was getting dressed."

Jake stopped toweling and stared at her. "He hadn't taken off his pants—he'd put on his shirt."

"It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely. It was the idea that kept eluding me last night. It was pay-up time. Maybe Parsons had promised to pay Rivera and then wouldn't. Maybe he'd promised him more than he delivered. Or maybe he didn't promise him anything but Rivera wanted anything he had and was enraged that he didn't have more on him."

"Scary how right this sounds. But it doesn't mean we're right, does it?"

"That's a jury's job to decide. Rivera's innocent unless they decide differently." Jake disappeared back into the bathroom and Betty swung her feet over onto the Spanish-wool rug at the side of the bed, which she was studying when Jake called out.

"Misdirection!"

"What?"

"That's what it's called when you're led to think in a certain way so you're not likely to see the way it really was!"

Which is what I have to do in this bloody play, Betty thought. And thought some more about how Helene, her character, would feel as the idea of going along with the other character's mistaken perception of her took hold. She caught sight of her face in the dressing-table mirror and was startled at the cunning in her eye. Too much.

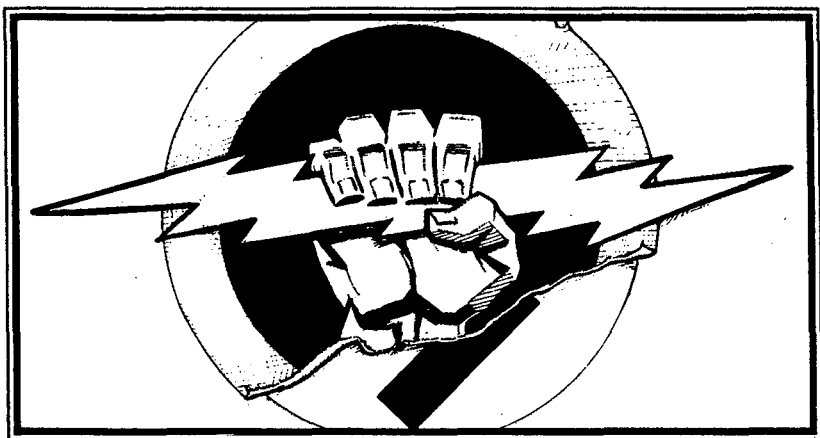
"Misdirection!" Jake exulted.

"I *hope* not," Betty said darkly.

"Q"

STEPHEN KING

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the only Dalglish short story to date by

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THE BOXDALE INHERITANCE

by P. D. JAMES

“You see, my dear Adam,” explained the Canon gently, as he walked with Chief Superintendent Dalglish under the Vicarage elms, “useful as the legacy would be to us, I wouldn’t feel happy in accepting it if Great Aunt Allie came by her money in the first place by wrongful means.”

What the Canon meant was that he and his wife wouldn’t be happy to inherit Great Aunt Allie’s fifty thousand pounds, if sixty-

Copyright © 1979 by P. D. James; originally titled “Great Aunt Allie’s Flypapers.”

seven years earlier she had poisoned her elderly husband with arsenic in order to get it.

As Great Aunt Allie had been accused and acquitted of just that charge in a 1902 trial which, for her Hampshire neighbors, had rivaled the Coronation as a public spectacle, the Canon's scruples were not altogether irrelevant. Admittedly, thought Dalgliesh, most people faced with the prospect of fifty thousand pounds would be happy to subscribe to the commonly held convention that, once an English Court has pronounced its verdict, the final truth of the matter has been established once and for all. There may possibly be a higher judicature in the next world but hardly in this. And so Hubert Boxdale would normally be happy to believe. But, faced with the prospect of an unexpected fortune, his scrupulous conscience was troubled. The gentle but obstinate voice went on:

"Apart from the moral principle of accepting tainted money, it wouldn't bring us happiness. I often think of that poor woman, driven restlessly round Europe in her search for peace, of that lonely life and unhappy death."

Dalgliesh recalled that Great Aunt Allie had moved in a predictable pattern with her retinue of servants, current lover, and general hangers-on from one luxury Riviera hotel to the next, with stays in Paris or Rome as the mood suited her. He was not sure that this orderly program of comfort and entertainment could be described as being restlessly driven round Europe or that the old lady had been primarily in search of peace. She had died, he recalled, by falling overboard from a millionaire's yacht during a rather wild party given by him to celebrate her eighty-eighth birthday. It was perhaps not an edifying death by the Canon's standards but Dalgliesh doubted whether she had, in fact, been unhappy at the time. Great Aunt Allie (it was impossible to think of her by any other name), if she had been capable of coherent thought, would probably have pronounced it a very good way to go. But this was hardly a point of view he could put forward comfortably to his present companion.

Canon Hubert Boxdale was Superintendent Adam Dalgliesh's godfather. Dalgliesh's father had been his Oxford contemporary and lifelong friend. He had been an admirable godfather: affectionate, uncensorious, genuinely concerned. In Dalgliesh's childhood, he had always been mindful of birthdays and imaginative about a small boy's preoccupations and desires.

Dalgliesh was very fond of him and privately thought him one of the few really good men he had known. It was only surprising that

the Canon had managed to live to seventy-one in a carnivorous world in which gentleness, humility, and unworldliness are hardly conducive to survival, let alone success. But his goodness had in some sense protected him. Faced with such manifest innocence, even those who exploited him, and they were not a few, extended some of the protection and compassion they might show to the slightly subnormal.

"Poor old darling," his daily woman would say, pocketing pay for six hours when she had worked five and helping herself to a couple of eggs from his refrigerator. "He's really not fit to be let out alone." It had surprised the then young and slightly priggish Detective Constable Dalglish to realize that the Canon knew perfectly well about the hours and the eggs, but thought that Mrs. Copthorne, with five children and an indolent husband, needed both more than he did. He also knew that if he started paying for five hours she would promptly work only four and extract another two eggs, and that this small and only dishonesty was somehow necessary to her self-esteem. He was good. But he was not a fool.

He and his wife were, of course, poor. But they were not unhappy—indeed it was a word impossible to associate with the Canon. The death of his two sons in the 1939 war had saddened but not destroyed him. But he had anxieties. His wife was suffering from disseminated sclerosis and was finding it increasingly hard to manage. There were comforts and appliances which she would need. He was now, belatedly, about to retire and his pension would be small. A legacy of fifty thousand pounds would enable them both to live in comfort for the rest of their lives and would also, Dalglish had no doubt, give them the pleasure of doing more for their various lame dogs. Really, he thought, the Canon was an almost embarrassingly deserving candidate for a modest fortune. Why couldn't the dear, silly old noodle take the cash and stop worrying?

He said cunningly: "Great Aunt Allie was found not guilty, you know, by an English jury. And it all happened nearly seventy years ago. Couldn't you bring yourself to accept their verdict?"

But the Canon's scrupulous mind was totally impervious to such sly innuendos. Dalglish told himself that he should have remembered what, as a small boy, he had discovered about Uncle Hubert's conscience—that it operated as a warning bell and that, unlike most people, Uncle Hubert never pretended that it hadn't sounded or that he hadn't heard it or that, having heard it, something must be wrong with the mechanism.

"Oh, I did, while she was alive. We never met, you know. I didn't wish to force myself on her. After all, she was a wealthy woman. My grandfather made a new will on his marriage and left her all he possessed. Our ways of life were very different. But I usually wrote briefly at Christmas and she sent a card in reply. I wanted to keep some contact in case, one day, she might want someone to turn to, and would remember that I am a priest."

And why should she want that, thought Dalgliesh. To clear her conscience? Was that what the dear old boy had in mind? So he must have had some doubts from the beginning. But of course he had; Dalgliesh knew something of the story, and the general feeling of the family and friends was that Great Aunt Allie had been extremely lucky to escape the gallows.

His own father's view, expressed with reticence, reluctance, and compassion, had not in essentials differed from that given by a local reporter at the time.

"How on earth did she expect to get away with it? Damned lucky to escape topping if you ask me."

"The news of the legacy came as a complete surprise?" asked Dalgliesh.

"Indeed, yes. I only saw her once at that first and only Christmas, six weeks after her marriage, when my grandfather died. We always talk of her as Great Aunt Allie, but in fact, as you know, she married my grandfather. But it seemed impossible to think of her as a step-grandmother.

"There was the usual family gathering at Colebrook Croft at the time I was there with my parents and my twin sisters. I was barely four and the twins were just eight months old. I can remember nothing of my grandfather or of his wife. After the murder—if one has to use that dreadful word—my mother returned home with us children, leaving my father to cope with the police, the solicitors, and the newsmen. It was a terrible time for him. I don't think I was even told that my grandfather was dead until about a year later. My old nurse, Nellie, who had been given Christmas as a holiday to visit her own family, told me that, soon after my return home.

"I asked her if Grandfather was now young and beautiful for always. She, poor woman, took it as a sign of infant prognostication and piety. Poor Nellie was sadly superstitious and sentimental, I'm afraid. But I knew nothing of Grandfather's death at the time and certainly can recall nothing of that Christmas visit or of my new

step-grandmother. Mercifully, I was little more than a baby when the murder was done."

"She was a music-hall artist, wasn't she?" asked Dalgliesh.

"Yes, and a very talented one. My grandfather met her when she was working with a partner in a hall in Cannes. He had gone to the South of France with his man-servant for his health. I understood that she extracted a gold watch from his chain and, when he claimed it, told him that he was English, had recently suffered from a stomach ailment, had two sons and a daughter, and was about to have a wonderful surprise. It was all correct except that his only daughter had died in childbirth, leaving him with a granddaughter—Marguerite Goddard."

"That was all easily guessable from Boxdale's voice and appearance," said Dalgliesh. "I can only suppose the surprise was the marriage?"

"It was certainly a surprise, and a most unpleasant one for the family. It is easy to deplore the snobbishness and the conventions of another age and, indeed, there was much in Edwardian England to deplore, but it wasn't a propitious marriage. I think of the difference in background, education, and way of life, the lack of common interests. And there was the disparity of age. Grandfather had married a girl just three months younger than his own granddaughter. I cannot wonder that the family were concerned, that they felt that the union could not, in the end, contribute to the contentment or happiness of either party."

And that was putting it charitably, thought Dalgliesh. The marriage certainly hadn't contributed to their happiness. From the point of view of the family, it had been a disaster. He recalled hearing of an incident when the local vicar and his wife, a couple who had actually dined at Colebrook Croft on the night of the murder, first called on the bride. Apparently old Augustus Boxdale had introduced her, saying: "Meet the prettiest little variety artiste in the business. Took a gold watch and notecase off me without any trouble. Would have had the elastic out of my pants if I hadn't watched out. Anyway, she stole my heart, didn't you, sweetheart?"

All this was accompanied by a hearty slap on the rump and a squeal of delight from the lady, who had promptly demonstrated her skill for extracting the Reverend Arthur Venable's bunch of keys from his left ear.

Dalgliesh thought it tactful not to remind the Canon of this story.

"What do you wish me to do, sir?" he inquired.

"It's asking a great deal, I know, when you're so busy. But if I had your assurance that you believed in Aunt Allie's innocence, I should feel happy about accepting the bequest. I wondered if it would be possible for you to see the records of the trial. Perhaps it would give you a clue. You're so clever at this sort of thing."

He spoke without flattery but with an innocent wonder at the strange vocations of men. Dalgliesh was, indeed, very clever at this sort of thing. A dozen or so men at present occupying security wings in HM prisons could testify to Chief Superintendent Dalgliesh's cleverness, as indeed could a handful of others walking free, whose defending counsel had been in their own way as clever as Chief Superintendent Dalgliesh.

But to reexamine a case over sixty years old seemed to require clairvoyance rather than cleverness. The trial judge and both learned counsels had been dead for over fifty years. Two world wars had taken their toll. Four reigns had passed. It was highly probable that, of those who had slept under the roof of Colebrook Croft on that fateful Boxing Day night of 1901, only the Canon still survived.

But the old man was troubled and had sought his help and Dalgliesh, with a day or two's leave due to him, had the time to give it.

"I'll do what I can," he promised.

The transcript of a trial which had taken place sixty-seven years ago took time and trouble to obtain even for a Chief Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police. It provided little comfort for the Canon. Mr. Justice Bellows had summed up with that avuncular simplicity with which he was wont to address juries, regarding them as a panel of well-intentioned but cretinous children. And the facts could have been comprehended by any child. Part of the summing up set them out with lucidity:

"And so, gentlemen of the jury, we come to the night of December twenty-sixth. Mr. Augustus Boxdale, who had perhaps indulged a little unwisely on Christmas Day, had retired to bed in his dressing room after luncheon, suffering from a recurrence of the slight indigestive trouble which had afflicted him for most of his life. You will have heard that he had taken luncheon with the members of his family and ate nothing which they, too, did not eat. You may feel you can acquit luncheon of anything worse than over-richness.

"Dinner was served at eight P.M. promptly, as was the custom at Colebrook Croft. There were present at that meal Mrs. Augustus Boxdale, the deceased's bride; his elder son, Captain Maurice Box-

dale, with his wife, his younger son, the Reverend Henry Boxdale, with his wife; his granddaughter, Miss Marguerite Goddard; and two neighbors, The Reverend and Mrs. Arthur Venables.

"You have heard how the accused took only the first course at dinner, which was ragout of beef, and then, at about eight-twenty, left the dining room to sit with her husband. Shortly after nine o'clock, she rang for the parlor maid, Mary Huddy, and ordered a basin of gruel to be brought up to Mr. Boxdale. You have heard that the deceased was fond of gruel, and indeed as prepared by Mrs. Muncie, the cook, it sounds a most nourishing dish for an elderly gentleman of weak digestion.

"You have heard Mrs. Muncie describe how she prepared the gruel according to Mrs. Beaton's admirable recipe and in the presence of Mary Huddy, in case, as she said, 'The master should take a fancy to it when I'm not at hand and you have to make it.'

"After the gruel had been prepared, Mrs. Muncie tasted it with a spoon and Mary Huddy carried it upstairs to the main bedroom, together with a jug of water to thin the gruel if it were too strong. As she reached the door, Mrs. Boxdale came out, her hands full of stockings and underclothes. She has told you that she was on her way to the bathroom to wash them through. She asked the girl to put the basin of gruel on the washstand by the window and Mary Huddy did so in her presence. Miss Huddy has told us that at the time she noticed the bowl of fly papers soaking in water and she knew that this solution was one used by Mrs. Boxdale as a cosmetic wash. Indeed, all the women who spent that evening in the house, with the exception of Mrs. Venables, have told you that they knew it was Mrs. Boxdale's practice to prepare this solution of fly papers.

"Mary Huddy and the accused left the bedroom together and you have heard the evidence of Mrs. Muncie that Miss Huddy returned to the kitchen after an absence of only a few minutes. Shortly after nine o'clock, the ladies left the dining room and entered the drawing room to take coffee.

"At nine-fifteen P.M., Miss Goddard excused herself to the company and said that she would go to see if her grandfather needed anything. The time is established precisely, because the clock struck the quarter hour as she left and Mrs. Venables commented on the sweetness of its chime. You have also heard Mrs. Venables' evidence and the evidence of Mrs. Maurice Boxdale and Mrs. Henry Boxdale that some of the ladies left the drawing room during the evening, and Mrs. Venables has testified that the three gentlemen remained

together until Miss Goddard appeared about three-quarters of an hour after to inform them that her grandfather had become very ill and to request that the doctor be sent for immediately.

"Miss Goddard has told you that when she entered her grandfather's room he was just finishing his gruel and was grumbling about its taste. She got the impression that this was merely a protest at being deprived of his dinner rather than that he genuinely considered that there was something wrong with the gruel. At any rate, he finished most of it and appeared to enjoy it despite his grumbles.

"You have heard Miss Goddard describe how, after her grandfather had had as much as he wanted of the gruel, she took the bowl next door and left it on the washstand. She then returned to her grandfather's bedroom and Mr. Boxdale, his wife, and his granddaughter played three-handed whist for about three-quarters of an hour.

"At ten o'clock Mr. Augustus Boxdale complained of feeling very ill. He suffered from griping pains in the stomach, from sickness and from looseness of the bowels. As soon as the symptoms began, Miss Goddard went downstairs to let her uncles know that her grandfather was worse and to ask that Doctor Eversley should be sent for urgently. Doctor Eversley has given you his evidence. He arrived at Colebrook Croft at ten-thirty P.M. when he found his patient very distressed and weak. He treated the symptoms and gave what relief he could, but Mr. Augustus Boxdale died shortly before midnight.

"Gentlemen of the jury, you have heard Marguerite Goddard describe how, as her grandfather's paroxysms increased in intensity, she remembered the gruel and wondered whether it could have disagreed with him in some way. She mentioned this possibility to her elder uncle, Captain Maurice Boxdale. Captain Boxdale has told you how he handed the bowl with its residue of gruel to Doctor Eversley with the request that the doctor should lock it in a cupboard in the library, seal the lock, and keep the key. You have heard how the contents of the bowl were later analyzed and with what results."

An extraordinary precaution for the gallant captain to have taken, thought Dalglish, and a most perspicacious young woman. Was it by chance or by design that the bowl hadn't been taken down to be washed up as soon as the old man had finished with it? Why was it, he wondered, that Marguerite Goddard hadn't rung for the parlor maid and requested her to remove it? Miss Goddard appeared the only other suspect. He wished he knew more about her.

But, except for those main protagonists, the characters in the drama did not emerge very clearly from the trial report. Why, indeed, should they? The British accusatorial system of trial is designed to answer one question: is the accused guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime charged? Exploration of the nuances of personality, speculation, and gossip have no place in the witness box.

The two Boxdale brothers came out as very dull fellows indeed. They and their estimable, respectable sloping-bosomed wives had sat at dinner in full view of each other from eight until after nine o'clock (a substantial meal, that dinner) and had said so in the witness box, more or less in identical words. The ladies' bosoms might have been heaving with far from estimable emotions of dislike, envy, embarrassment, or resentment of the interloper. If so, they didn't tell the court.

But the two brothers and their wives were clearly innocent, even if a detective at that time could have conceived of the guilt of a gentfolk so well respected, so eminently respectable. Even their impeccable alibis had a nice touch of social and sexual distinction. The Reverend Arthur Venables had vouched for the gentlemen, and his good wife for the ladies.

Besides, what motive had they? They could no longer gain financially by the old man's death. If anything, it was in their interests to keep him alive in the hope that disillusion with his marriage or return to sanity might occur to cause him to change his will. So far, Dalglish had learned nothing that could cause him to give the Canon the assurance for which he hoped.

It was then that he remembered Aubrey Glatt. Glatt was a wealthy amateur criminologist who had made a study of all the notable Victorian and Edwardian poison cases. He was not interested in anything earlier or later, being as obsessively wedded to his period as any serious historian—which indeed he had some claim to call himself. He lived in a Georgian house in Winchester—his affection for the Victorian and Edwardian age did not extend to its architecture—and was only three miles from Colebrook Croft.

A visit to the London library disclosed that he hadn't written a book on the case but it was improbable that he had totally neglected a crime close at hand and so in period. Dalglish had occasionally helped him with the technical details of police procedure. Glatt, in response to a telephone call, was happy to return the favor with the offer of afternoon tea and information.

Tea was served in his elegant drawing room by a parlor maid wearing a frilly cap with streamers. Dalglish wondered what wage Glatt paid her to persuade her to wear it. She looked as if she could have played a role in any of his favorite Victorian dreams and Dalglish had an uncomfortable thought that arsenic might be dispensed with the cucumber sandwiches.

Glatt nibbled away and was expansive.

"It's interesting that you should have taken this sudden and, if I may say so, somewhat inexplicable interest in the Boxdale murder. I got out my notebook on the case only yesterday. Colebrook Croft is being demolished to make way for a new housing estate and I thought I would visit it for the last time. The family, of course, haven't lived there since the 1914-18 war. Architecturally, it's completely undistinguished, but one grieves to see it go. We might drive over after tea if you're agreeable.

"I never wrote my book on the case, you know. I planned a work entitled *The Colebrook Croft Mystery* or *Who Killed Augustus Boxdale?* But the answer was all too obvious."

"No real mystery?" suggested Dalglish.

"Who else could it have been but Allegra Boxdale? She was born Allegra Porter, you know. Do you think her mother could have been thinking of Byron? I imagine not. There's a picture of her on page two of the notebook, by the way, taken by a photographer in Cannes on her wedding day. I call it *Beauty and the Beast*."

The old photograph had scarcely faded and Great Aunt Allie half smiled at Dalglish across nearly seventy years.

Her broad face, with its wide mouth and rather snub nose, was framed by two wings of dark hair swept high and topped, in the fashion of the day, by an immense flowered hat. The features were too coarse for real beauty, but the eyes were magnificent, deep-set and well spaced—and the chin round and determined. Beside this vital young Amazon, poor Augustus Boxdale, clutching his bride as if for support, was but a very frail and undersized beast. Their pose was unfortunate. She almost looked as if she were about to fling him over her shoulder.

Glatt shrugged. "The face of a murderess? I've known less likely ones. Her Counsel suggested, of course, that the old man had poisoned his own gruel during the short time she left it on the washstand to cool while she visited the bathroom. But why should he? All the evidence suggests that he was in a state of post-nuptial

euphoria, poor senile old booby. Our Augustus was in no hurry to leave this world, particularly by such an agonizing means. Besides, I doubt whether he even knew the gruel was there. He was in bed next door in his dressing room, remember."

Dalglish asked: "What about Marguerite Goddard? There's no evidence about the exact time when she entered the bedroom."

"I thought you'd get onto that. She could have arrived while her step-grandmother was in the bathroom, poisoned the gruel, hidden herself either in the main bedroom or elsewhere until it had been taken into Augustus, then joined her grandfather and his bride as if she had just come upstairs. It's possible, I admit. But it is unlikely. She was less inconvenienced than any of the family by her grandfather's second marriage. Her mother was Augustus Boxdale's eldest child who married, very young, a wealthy patent-medicine manufacturer. She died in childbirth and the husband only survived her by a year. Marguerite Goddard was an heiress. She was also most advantageously engaged to Captain the Honorable John Brize-Lacey. Marguerite Goddard—young, beautiful, in possession of the Goddard fortune, not to mention the Goddard emeralds and the eldest son of a Lord—was hardly a serious suspect. In my view, Defense Counsel—that was Roland Gort Lloyd, remember—was wise to leave her strictly alone."

"A memorable defense, I believe."

"Magnificent. There's no doubt Allegra Boxdale owed her life to Gort Lloyd. I know that concluding speech by heart—

" 'Gentlemen of the Jury, I beseech you in the sacred name of Justice to consider what you are at. It is your responsibility, and yours alone, to decide the fate of this young woman. She stands before you now, young, vibrant, glowing with health, the years stretching before her with their promise and their hopes. It is in your power to cut off all this as you might top a nettle with one swish of your cane. To condemn her to the slow torture of those last waiting weeks, to that last dreadful walk, to heap calumny on her name, to desecrate those few happy weeks of marriage with the man who loved her so greatly, and to cast her into the final darkness of an ignominious grave.' "

"Pause for dramatic effect. Then the crescendo in that magnificent voice. 'And on what evidence, gentlemen? I ask you.' Another pause. Then the thunder. 'On what evidence?' "

"A powerful defense," said Dalglish. "But I wonder how it would go down with a modern judge and jury."

"Well, it went down very effectively with that 1902 jury. Of course, the abolition of capital punishment has rather cramped the more histrionic style. I'm not sure that the reference to topping nettles was in the best of taste, but the jury got the message. They decided that on the whole they preferred not to have the responsibility of sending the accused to the gallows. They were out six hours reaching their verdict and it was greeted with some applause.

"If any of those worthy citizens had been asked to wager five pounds of their own good money on her innocence, I suspect that it would have been a different matter. Allegra Boxdale had helped him, of course. The Criminal Evidence Act, passed three years earlier, enabled him to put her in the witness box. She wasn't an actress of a kind for nothing. Somehow she managed to persuade the jury that she had genuinely loved the old man."

"Perhaps she had," suggested Dalgliesh. "I don't suppose there had been much kindness in her life. And he was kind."

"No doubt, no doubt. But love?" Glatt was impatient. "My dear Dalgliesh! He was a singularly ugly old man of sixty-nine. She was an attractive girl of twenty-one!"

Dalgliesh doubted whether love, that iconoclastic passion, was susceptible to this kind of simple arithmetic but he didn't argue.

Glatt went on: "The prosecution couldn't suggest any other romantic attachment. The police got in touch with her previous partner, of course. He was discovered to be a bald, undersized little man, sharp as a weasel, with a buxom wife and five children. He had moved down the coast after the partnership broke up and was now working with a new girl. He said regretfully that she was coming along nicely, thank you gentlemen, but would never be a patch on Allie, and that, if Allie got her neck out of the noose and ever wanted a job, she knew where to come. It was obvious, even to the most suspicious policeman, that his interest was professional. As he said: 'What was a grain or two of arsenic between friends?'

"The Boxdales had no luck after the trial. Captain Maurice Boxdale was killed in 1916, leaving no children, and the Reverend Edward lost his wife and their twin daughters in the 1918 influenza epidemic. He survived until 1932. The boy Hubert may still be alive, but I doubt it. That family always were a sickly lot.

"My greatest achievement, incidentally, was in tracing Marguerite Goddard. I hadn't realized she was still alive. She never married Brize-Lacey, or indeed anyone else. He distinguished himself in the 1914-18 war, came successfully through, and eventually married

an eminently suitable young woman, the sister of a brother officer. He inherited the title in 1925 and died in 1953.

"But Marguerite Goddard may be alive now for all I know. She may even be living in the same modest Bournemouth hotel where I found her. Not that my efforts in tracing her were rewarded. She absolutely refused to see me. That's the note that she sent out to me, by the way. Just there."

It was meticulously pasted into the notebook in its chronological order and carefully annotated. Aubrey Glatt was a natural researcher; Dalglish couldn't help wondering whether this passion for accuracy might not have been more rewarding spent other than in the careful documentation of murder.

The note was written in an elegant upright hand, the strokes black and very thin but clear and unwavering.

Miss Goddard presents her compliments to Mr. Aubrey Glatt. She did not murder her grandfather and has neither the time nor the inclination to gratify his curiosity by discussing the person who did.

Aubrey Glatt said, "After that extremely disobliging note, I felt there was really no point in going on with the book."

Glatt's passion for Edwardian England obviously extended to a wider field than its murders and they drove to Colebrook Croft high above the green Hampshire lanes in an elegant 1910 Daimler. Aubrey wore a thin tweed coat and deerstalker hat and looked, Dalglish thought, rather like a Sherlock Holmes, with himself as attendant Watson.

"We are only just in time, my dear Dalglish," he said when they arrived. "The engines of destruction are assembled. That ball on a chain looks like the eyeball of God ready to strike. Let us make our number with the attendant artisans. You will have no wish to trespass, will you?"

The work of demolition had not yet begun, but the inside of the house had been stripped and plundered, the great rooms echoed to their footsteps like gaunt and deserted barracks after the final retreat. They moved from room to room, Glatt mourning the forgotten glories of an age he had been born too late to enjoy, Dalglish with his mind on the somewhat more immediate and practical concerns.

The design of the house was simple and formalized. The first floor, on which were most of the main bedrooms, had a long corridor running the whole length of the facade. The master bedroom was at the southern end with two large windows giving a distant view of

Winchester Cathedral tower. A communicating door led to a small dressing room.

The main corridor had a row of four identical large windows. The brass curtain rods and wooden rings had been removed (they were collectors' items now), but the ornate carved pelmets were still in place. Here must have hung pairs of heavy curtains giving cover to anyone who wished to slip out of view. And Dalgliesh noted with interest that one of the windows was exactly opposite the door of the main bedroom. By the time they had left Colebrook Croft and Glatt had dropped him at Winchester Station, Dalgliesh was beginning to formulate a theory.

His next move was to trace Marguerite Goddard, if she were still alive. It took him nearly a week of weary searching—a frustrating trail along the South Coast from hotel to hotel. Almost everywhere his inquiries were met with defensive hostility. It was the usual story of a very old lady who had become more demanding, arrogant, and eccentric as her health and fortune waned—an unwelcome embarrassment to manager and fellow guests alike. The hotels were all modest, a few almost sordid. What, he wondered, had become of the legendary Goddard fortune?

From the last landlady, he learned that Miss Goddard had become ill, really sick indeed, and had been removed six months previously to the local district general hospital. And it was there that he found her.

The ward sister was surprisingly young, a petite dark-haired girl with a tired face and challenging eyes. "Miss Goddard is very ill. We've put her in one of the side wards. Are you a relative? If so, you're the first one who has bothered to call and you're lucky to be in time. When she is delirious she seems to expect a Captain Brize-Lacey to call. You're not he, are you?"

"Captain Brize-Lacey will not be calling. No, I'm not a relative. She doesn't even know me. But I would like to visit her if she's well enough and is willing to see me. Could you please give her this note?"

He couldn't force himself on a defenseless and dying woman. She still had the right to say no. He was afraid she would refuse him. And if she did, he might never learn the truth. He wrote four words on the back page of his diary, signed them, tore out the page, folded it, and handed it to the sister.

She was back very shortly.

"She'll see you. She's weak, of course, and very old, but she's perfectly lucid now. Only please don't tire her."

"I'll try not to stay too long."

The girl laughed: "Don't worry. She'll throw you out soon enough if she gets bored. The chaplain and the Red Cross librarian have a terrible time with her. Third floor on the left. There's a stool to sit on by the bed. We will ring the bell at the end of visiting time."

She bustled off, leaving him to find his own way.

The corridor was very quiet. At the far end, he could glimpse through the open door of the main ward the regimented rows of beds, each with its pale-blue coverlet, the bright glow of flowers on some of the tables, and the laden visitors making their way in pairs to each bedside. There was a faint buzz of welcome, a hum of conversation. But no one was visiting the side wards. Here, in the silence of the aseptic corridor, Dalglish could smell death.

The woman propped high against the pillows in the third room on the left no longer looked human. She lay rigidly, her long arms disposed like sticks on the coverlet. This was a skeleton clothed with a thin membrane of flesh, beneath whose yellow transparency the tendons and veins were as plainly visible as an anatomist's model. She was nearly bald and the high-domed skull under its spare down of hair was as brittle and vulnerable as a child's. Only the eyes still held life, burning in their deep sockets with an animal vitality. But when she spoke, her voice was distinctive and unwavering, evoking as her appearance never could the memory of imperious youth.

She took up his note and read aloud four words:

"'It was the child.' You are right, of course. The four-year-old Hubert Boxdale killed his grandfather. You signed this note Adam Dalglish. There was no Dalglish connected with the case."

"I'm a detective of the Metropolitan Police. But I'm not here in any official capacity. I've known about this case for a number of years from a dear friend. I have a natural curiosity to learn the truth. And I have formed a theory."

"And now, like that poseur, Aubrey Glatt, you want to write a book?"

"No. I shall tell no one. You have my promise."

Her voice was ironic.

"Thank you. I am a dying woman, Mr. Dalglish. I tell you that not to invite your sympathy, which it would be an impertinence for you to offer and which I neither want nor require, but to explain why it no longer matters to me what you say or do. But I, too, have

a natural curiosity. Your note, cleverly, was intended to provoke it. I should like to know how you discovered the truth."

Dalglish drew the visitors' stool from under the bed and sat down beside her. She did not look at him. The skeleton hands still holding his note did not move.

"Everyone in Colebrook Croft who could have killed Augustus Boxdale was accounted for except the one person nobody considered—the small boy. He was an intelligent, articulate child. He was almost certainly left to his own devices. His nurse did not accompany the family to Colebrook Croft and the servants who were there over Christmas had extra work and also the care of the delicate twin girls.

"The boy probably spent much time with his grandfather and the new bride. She, too, was lonely and disregarded. He could have trotted around with her as she went about her various activities. He could have watched her making her arsenical face wash and, when he asked, as a child will, what it was for, could have been told 'to make me young and beautiful.'

"He loved his grandfather, but he must have known that the old man was neither young nor beautiful. Suppose he woke up on that Boxing Day night, overfed and excited after the Christmas festivities? Suppose he went to Allegra Boxdale's room in search of comfort and companionship and saw there the basin of gruel and the arsenical mixture together on the washstand? Suppose he decided that here was something he could do for his grandfather?"

The voice from the bed said quietly: "And suppose someone stood unnoticed in the doorway and watched him?"

"So you were behind the window curtains on the landing looking through the open door?" Dalglish said.

"Of course. He knelt on the chair, two chubby hands clasping the bowl of poison, pouring it with infinite care into his grandfather's gruel. I watched while he replaced the linen cloth over the basin, got down from the chair, replaced it with careful art against the wall, and trotted out into the corridor and back to the nursery. About three seconds later, Allegra came out of the bathroom and I watched while she carried the gruel into my grandfather. A second later I went into the main bedroom. The bowl of poison had been a little heavy for Hubert's small hands to manage and I saw that a small pool had been spilt on the polished top of the washstand. I mopped it up with my handkerchief. Then I poured some of the water from the jug into the poison bowl to bring up the level. It only took a

couple of seconds and I was ready to join Allegra and my grandfather in the bedroom and sit with him while he ate his gruel."

"I watched him die without pity and without remorse. I think I hated them both equally. The grandfather who had adored, petted, and indulged me all through my childhood and deteriorated into this disgusting old lecher, unable to keep his hands off this woman even when I was in the room. He had rejected me and his family, jeopardized my engagement, made our name a laughing stock in the County, and all for a woman that my grandmother wouldn't have employed as a kitchen maid. I wanted them both dead. And they were both going to die. But it would be by other hands than mine. I could deceive myself that it wasn't my doing."

Dagliesh asked: "When did she find out?"

"She knew that evening. When my grandfather's agony began, she went outside for the jug of water. She wanted a cool cloth for his head. It was then that she noticed that the level of water in the jug had fallen and that a small pool of liquid on the washstand had been mopped up. I should have realized that she would have seen that pool. She had been trained to register every detail. She thought at the time that Mary Huddy had spilt some of the water when she set down the tray and the gruel. But who could have mopped it up? And why?"

"And when did she face you with the truth?"

"Not until after the trial. Allegra had magnificent courage. She knew what she stood to gain. She gambled with her life for a fortune."

And then Dagliesh understood what had happened to the Goddard inheritance. "So she made you pay?"

"Of course. Every penny. The Goddard fortune, the Goddard emeralds. She lived in luxury for sixty-seven years on my money. She ate and dressed on my money. When she moved with her lovers from hotel to hotel, it was on my money. She paid them with my money. And if she has left anything, which I doubt, it is my money. My grandfather left very little. He had been senile and had let money run through his fingers like sand."

"And your engagement?"

"It was broken, you could say, by mutual consent. A marriage, Mr. Dagliesh, is like any legal contract. It is most successful when both parties are convinced they have a bargain. Captain Brize-Lacey was sufficiently discouraged by the scandal of a murder in the fam-

ily. He was a proud and highly conventional man. But that alone might have been accepted with the Goddard fortune and the Goddard emeralds to deodorize the bad smell. But the marriage couldn't have succeeded if he had discovered that he had married socially beneath him, into a family with a major scandal and no compensating fortune."

Dagliesh said: "Once you had begun to pay, you had no choice but to go on. I see that. But why did you pay? She could hardly have told her story. It would have meant involving the child."

"Oh, no! That wasn't her plan at all. She never meant to involve the child. She was a sentimental woman and she was fond of Hubert. No, she intended to accuse me of murder outright. Then, if I decided to tell the truth, how would it help me? After all, I wiped up the spilled liquid, I topped up the bowl. She had nothing to lose, remember—neither life nor reputation. They couldn't try her twice. That's why she waited until after the trial. It made her secure forever."

"But what of me? In the circles in which I moved at that time, reputation was everything. She needed only to breathe the story in the ears of a few servants and I was finished. The truth can be remarkably tenacious. But it wasn't only reputation. I paid in the shadow of the gallows."

Dagliesh asked, "But could she ever prove it?"

Suddenly she looked at him and gave an eerie screech of laughter. It tore at her throat until he thought the taut tendons would snap violently.

"Of course she could! You fool! Don't you understand? She took my handkerchief, the one I used to mop up the arsenic mixture. That was her profession, remember! Sometime during that evening, perhaps when we were all crowding around the bed, two soft plump fingers insinuated themselves between the satin of my evening dress and my flesh and extracted that stained and damning piece of linen."

She stretched out feebly toward the bedside locker. Dagliesh saw what she wanted and pulled open the drawer. There on the top was a small square of very fine linen with a border of hand-stitched lace. He took it up. In the corner was her monogram delicately embroidered. And half of the handkerchief was still stiff and stained with brown.

She said: "She left instructions with her solicitors that this was to be returned to me after her death. She always knew where I was. But now she's dead. And I shall soon follow. You may have the

handkerchief, Mr. Dalgliesh. It can be of no further use to either of us now."

Dalgliesh put it in his pocket without speaking. As soon as possible he would see that it was burnt. But there was something else he had to say. "Is there anything you would wish me to do? Is there anyone you want told, or to tell? Would you care to see a priest?"

Again there was that uncanny screech of laughter, but softer now. "There's nothing I can say to a priest. I only regret what I did because it wasn't successful. That is hardly the proper frame of mind for a good confession. But I bear her no ill will. One should be a good loser. But I've paid, Mr. Dalgliesh. For sixty-seven years I've paid. And in this world, young man, the rich only pay once."

She lay back as if suddenly exhausted. There was a silence for a moment. Then she said with sudden vigor: "I believe your visit has done me good. I would be obliged if you'd return each afternoon for the next three days. I shan't trouble you after that."

Dalgliesh extended his leave with some difficulty and stayed at a local inn. He saw her each afternoon. They never spoke again of the murder. And when he came punctually at two P.M. on the fourth day, it was to be told that Miss Goddard had died peacefully in the night with apparently no trouble to anyone. She was, as she had said, a good loser.

A week later, Dalgliesh reported to the Canon.

"I was able to see a man who has made a detailed study of the case. I have read the transcript of the trial and visited Colebrook Croft. And I have seen one other person closely connected with the case but who is now dead. I know you will want me to respect confidence and to say no more than I need."

The Canon murmured his quiet assurance.

Dalgliesh went on quickly: "As a result, I can give you my word that the verdict was a just verdict and that not one penny of your grandfather's fortune is coming to you through anyone's wrong doing."

He turned his face away and gazed out of the window. There was a long silence. The old man was probably giving thanks in his own way. Then Dalgliesh was aware of his godfather speaking. Something was being said about gratitude, about the time he had given up to the investigation.

"Please don't misunderstand me, Adam. But when the formalities have been completed, I should like to donate something to a charity named by you, one close to your heart."

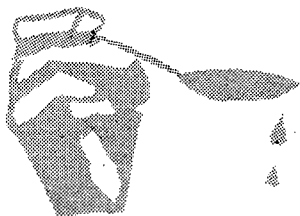
Dagliesh smiled. His contributions to charity were impersonal—a quarterly obligation discharged by banker's order. The Canon obviously regarded charities as so many old clothes: all friends but some fitted better and were consequently more affectionately regarded than others.

But inspiration came.

"It's good of you to think of it, sir. I rather liked what I learned about Great Aunt Allie. It would be pleasant to give something in her name. Isn't there a society for the assistance of retired and indigent variety artists, conjurers, and so on?"

The Canon, predictably, knew that there was and could name it.

Dagliesh said: "Then I think, Canon, that Great Aunt Allie would have agreed that a donation in her name would be entirely appropriate."



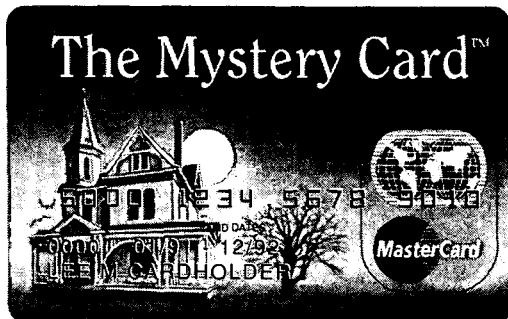
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a **NEW** short story by

HENRY SLESAR

"I won't blame you if you refuse to hear my story after the first five minutes," Bern told the woman "—if you have me thrown out or threaten to call the police. I know exactly what your first thought is going to be: that I'm here to take advantage of you in some way. You're obviously a very wealthy woman and you're only too aware that the world is full of confidence men, some of them even born on January twenty-eighth, nineteen sixty-one. The day your son died."

Familiar themes often crop up in these pages—they're the substance of many of our most popular anthologies. This one, that of the long-lost child, has been treated in our pages before and is here to haunt you once again, thanks to the intriguing imagination of Henry Slesar . . .

HOME AGAIN

by HENRY SLESAR

He wasn't prepared for the reality of the house. The bricks were more bricklike than he had expected. The stone facing wasn't alabaster but the color of faded coral. The pillars on the porch didn't rise to the same height as the columns built by his imagination. Bern Secombe wondered, would the old lady be different, too?

The man who answered the door was in his shirtsleeves, tugging a suspender loop over his right shoulder. He was at least seventy, hobble-legged and grizzled. Despite his sloth and surly expression, Bern knew he was a servant. When he asked for Mrs. Markey, the old man looked at Bern's drab suit, his unimpressive height and nondescript face, and asked if he was expected.

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"Yes and no," Bern said truthfully.

The answer didn't seem to unsettle the old man. He had already decided that the caller was of no consequence. He shuffled down the hallway past a curving staircase toward the closed double doors of the living room and pushed them open in a swift, triumphant gesture as if to say, There! What do you think of that, Mr. Nobody?

It was a grandeur that would have awed an earlier generation. Now the vaulted ceiling, the thousand-piece crystal chandelier, the flocked wallpaper and red-plush furniture had the look of a good Midwestern hotel lobby. Bern stepped into the thick pile of the Aubusson carpet and looked for the reality of Mrs. Beverly Markey.

She was small. She stood up when Bern entered and her floor-length robe never showed the contour of her body. Her hair was blue, but her eye color was concealed by thick-lensed glasses. Her complexion was remarkably smooth for her sixty years, and Bern guessed it was because her skin was rarely exposed to weather. Mrs. Markey, as everyone knew, was a recluse. She had never left her house since the funeral of her youngest son, David Paul. Her twin maids, Lily and Millie, did all the shopping and her man Leon handled the rest of the outside chores. Mrs. Markey was a hothouse flower, and yet there was something steely in her posture, something stony in the eyes only glimpsed behind the mask of her spectacles.

Leon looked like he wanted to stay for the conversation. He had long ago appointed himself guardian of Mrs. Markey's affairs, and she had to ask him twice to leave. Bern looked harmless enough, so Leon shrugged and limped out of the room, almost certainly to station himself right outside the closed doors.

Mrs. Markey didn't greet Bern or ask his business. Instead, she picked up the folded paper lying on an end table and read his own letter aloud to him.

"Dear Mrs. Markey: My name is Bernard Secombe. I'm employed by a resort company headquartered in Florida. However, I am planning to visit the Detroit area soon and would very much like to call upon you at Pontoon Lake. The reason for this desire can only be expressed in person. All I can say at the moment is that it has to do with your late son, David Paul Markey."

She lowered the paper and looked at him, her eyes offering a cold glint of metallic grey in the center of each lens. "My son has been dead for more than thirty years, Mr. Secombe. You've waited a long time to come by with—reminiscences."

"It's not quite that," Bern said, clearing his throat.

"Frankly, I don't see how you could have known David. He wasn't away from home very often. He went to one summer camp, called Mohawk, but he despised it and only stayed three weeks. He went to the Burleigh School for only one semester before he drowned. Before he was drowned."

Bern lifted his head as she amended the last sentence. She hadn't emphasized the added word.

"What I'm saying, Mr. Secombe, is that I'm not aware that David had any childhood friendships. So pardon me if I'm a bit skeptical about this visit."

"I didn't say I was David's friend. I wasn't." Bern, his legs weakening, wished he had been asked to sit down. "The truth is he died before I was born."

"You're how old?"

"Thirty."

"You look older," she said, with the privileged bluntness of age.

"I was born January twenty-eighth, nineteen sixty-one."

This time it was the old lady's legs that weakened. She sat down in a wing chair that dwarfed her small frame even further. Bern decided it was permission enough to sit on the leather sofa opposite.

"This isn't going to be easy to explain," he said. "I never attached any significance to the day I was born. Obviously, thousands of babies came into the world that day. The reason I give it significance now is what I've come to talk to you about. I won't blame you if you refuse to hear my story after the first five minutes—if you have me thrown out or threaten to call the police. I know exactly what your first thought is going to be: that I'm here to take advantage of you in some way. You're obviously a very wealthy woman and you're only too aware that the world is full of confidence men, some of them even born on January twenty-eighth, nineteen sixty-one. The day your son died."

Mrs. Markey had flattened her hands on both cheeks. Unlike her face, the hands were wrinkled and liver-spotted. Despite the gesture, her voice remained steady.

"I'm listening."

"I was an only child, born in Providence, Rhode Island," he said. "My parents were killed in a theater fire when I was six, so I lived with my grandparents, both of whom died of natural causes by the time I was in college. I studied to be an engineer, but my math skills were inferior, so I gave it up and quit in my second year and went to work as an assistant manager in a hotel. I've done some other

things since. Right now, I'm working for a company that sells time-sharing in various resorts. Don't worry—that's all the boring biography I'm going to give you."

"Then please get to the point," Mrs. Markey said.

"I want to, believe me. The problem is, I'm not sure what the point is. I'm not sure I can explain this lifelong curse I've had, or why it happened to me, or what if anything you can do about it."

"Me?" the old lady said.

Bern took a deep breath—so deep he inhaled the scent of her lilac soap, the lemon in the saucer of the teacup beside her, the pungent sweetness of decaying roses in a vase on the coffee table. "When I was a very small child," he said, "I started having these dreams. I dreamt of a house. It was a lakefront house built of red brick with a white-stone facade. There were six columns on the front porch and large boxwood shrubs on both sides."

He stopped and the old woman said: "Are you describing this house? If you are, it's inaccurate."

"I know," Bern said, looking at the carpet. "The stone is pink. There are eight columns, not six. There are no boxwoods."

"Go on," Mrs. Markey said lightly. "I've had a very dull week. At least this is amusing. What else did you dream?"

"I dreamed of a woman. She was dark and beautiful, with wonderfully soft hands. She was a gliding woman. I never saw her feet in my dreams. Her dresses may have been very long, but I'm not really sure about that. She was so full of love for me that it made me sad. I used to wake up in tears, if only because I missed that love when the dream was over."

"Do you know who this woman was?"

"She was my mother. I don't mean my real mother—I barely remember her. It's almost as if my subconscious doesn't *want* to remember her."

"If there's one word I loathe," Mrs. Markey said, "it's the word 'subconscious.' My whole generation used that silly word to excuse every mistake they made."

"In the dreams, which started before the fire at the Orpheum, the woman was always my mother. If there was also a substitute father, I wasn't aware of him. But I was very much aware of the house, of its many rooms, a lawn of unbroken green like a new billiard table. In fact, there was an actual billiard table in some of the dreams. I was allowed to play with the red and white balls. Someone lifted me

and held me while I poked them with a cuestick. May I ask if that means anything to you?"

"Why should it?"

"Never mind," he smiled. "I still have a few minutes' grace, so I'll say as much as I can before you decide I'm some kind of mad person. I'll tell you what happened when I grew up."

"Yes," she said. "Please do."

"The dreams didn't stop. In fact, they became more vivid, more detailed. They affected my waking life. I was a nervous person, some would say neurotic. In school, I was a poor student. At work, I was forgetful, indifferent. My social life was even worse. I couldn't seem to make friends. I was actually glad when the day was over and it was time to sleep, to go back to my dreams. But eventually I realized that they were more than dreams." He paused. "They were memories."

In the momentary silence that followed, he looked at the painting over the fireplace. It was a portrait of a fierce-looking man wearing a black suit so monolithic that the only highlight was the head of a silver-headed cane. Mrs. Markey didn't move.

"You mean you were remembering places you actually knew in your infancy? I've had that experience myself. I once described a room to my father—a smoke-filled room filled with men with booming voices. He was quite surprised. I had been less than a year old when he had brought me to the Union Club, showing off his firstborn."

"This was different," Bern said. "My memories were of places I had never seen, never visited. Of people I never knew, events that had nothing to do with my life. I kept it a secret, of course, although once I told a girl about it, a girl I thought I wanted to marry. She broke the engagement. She told her friends that I was 'eerie.' It was the right word for my own feelings about it."

"I'm not sure I understand you," the woman said. "You seem to imply that these peculiar memories were connected to me, to this house. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Is there a billiard room downstairs, Mrs. Markey?"

She frowned. "There was one, but I shut it up years ago. When this house was built at the beginning of the century, architects were always talking wealthy men into billiard rooms. The way they talk people into swimming pools and tennis courts today."

"May I do something? May I describe the room to you? It'll probably be as inaccurate as my memory of this house, but I'd like to try."

"So we're to play games," Mrs. Markey said, folding her hands in her lap. "Very well."

"It's a large, rather narrow room with wood paneling. There are two hanging lights over the table, both with green-glass shades. There is only one window, a small one near the ceiling, looking out at ground level. There are cuestick racks, of course, but I don't actually recall where."

"Mr.—Bernard, is it?"

"My name is Secombe. Bernard is my first name, although I'm usually called Bern."

"The room you have just described could be any billiard room, in any house. I'm sure you realize that."

"There is one other detail. As you walk in, standing in the corner of the room is a large jade Buddha."

She tightened her mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm not impressed, Mr. Secombe. It's the sort of detail anyone might have knowledge of. My father was a prominent judge, a politician. He was the subject of a number of articles and interviews. Details about him, about his house, were often on the public record."

"You think this is a parlor trick," Bern said. "Of course you would. I just don't know how else to explain myself, how else to tell you about these eerie things that link me to your family."

"Then I assume I haven't seen your entire act?" She bent her small head almost coquettishly. "Go on and finish it. I won't say a word until you take your bow."

Bern stood up.

"The staircase is important in my dreams. In one of them, I'm being carried upstairs by a man who smells like horses. My mother is right behind us, and she's upset about something. I think I'm in pain, but I'm not sure—you know how dreams are. Then I'm in my bedroom—only it's not really my bedroom. I have the feeling that I'm in another room, bigger, sunnier. It has two large windows facing a garden. There's a tree so close that its branches scratch the glass panes in a windstorm and frighten me. I remember being too ashamed to tell you about it."

"To tell *me* about it," Mrs. Markey said, smiling thinly. "So now we're not hinting any more. The 'mother' is me."

"Yes."

"The small, dark, beautiful woman." She laughed.

"And someone else," Bern said. "There was someone else I was ashamed to tell about my fears. My brother."

Whatever pleasant traces the laughter left on her face died away in an instant. Mrs. Markey picked up her teacup and sipped some of the cold liquid. Bern waited a moment and then continued.

"He was the other person in my dreams, in almost all of them. Sometimes I was afraid of him. Most of the time—I wanted to be with him. I wanted him to care about me. I wanted to be just like him. I know you haven't seen your eldest son in many years, Mrs. Markey, and maybe it's a memory you don't want stirred—"

"We're talking about *your* memories, Mr. Secombe," she said sharply. "Not mine."

"Then you really don't understand what I'm telling you. That even though I've never met you before, for some reason I can't explain, our memories of the past are the same."

For a moment, he thought she was going to call for Leon, that the interview was at an end. But then she gave him a crafty look and settled back in her chair.

"Now we'll play the game by my rules," she said. "I'll ask some questions, you'll give me answers. No points will be awarded. Ready?"

"I'd rather not do this," Bern said.

"I had a nickname for my little boy that was so disgustingly cute I didn't dare utter it in public without making him furious. Surely you heard that name in your dreams."

"This is a bad idea," Bern said. "It will only upset you."

"How dare you say what will upset me! You've obviously done your homework, Mr. Secombe, you've learned some very easy-to-learn facts about my dead son and you're perfectly willing, for whatever reason, to claim them as some kind of ghostly memory! Yes, his grandfather lifted David up to play billiards. And he was also carried up that staircase by my stable boy when he fell from a horse and broke his leg. As you suggest, he was given the best bedroom to recuperate, and there was a tree smack up against the window. It's still there, and I suppose it makes spooky noises in a windstorm even today."

"The nickname was Babyboots," Bern said.

It had the effect of stopping her, but not for long.

"Yes, you really have done your homework. Now please tell me exactly what this is about and what you want from me."

"I don't want anything," Bern said. "I just needed to come here. I needed to be in this house, to see you." He almost said the word "again," but he didn't. The effort made tears spring to his eyes, and

Mrs. Markey's own eyes behind the thick lenses were good enough to catch it.

For the first time since his arrival, an expression close to fear crossed her face.

"I don't think I can take more of this game right now," she said. "I realize what you're implying, of course. That somehow, for some mysterious reason known only to God, the soul of my little boy passed into your body at the hour of your birth. I'm sure you know that precise hour, don't you?" He didn't reply. "Oh, go ahead," she cried, "play all your cards, Mr. Secombe, don't be shy!"

"I don't know the exact time. I know it was morning. Around seven or eight A.M."

"Of course, January twenty-eighth, nineteen sixty-one. Seventhirty A.M. The same time my David 'fell' through the ice of Pontoon Lake and drowned. With his brother standing by and watching. The big brother he adored so much."

"I'm afraid that was in my dreams, too. I didn't want to bring it up, not today."

"You are never going to 'bring it up,'" Mrs. Markey said. "You are never coming back to this house again, Mr. Secombe. Dream your dreams somewhere else, but please stay away from me."

She had raised her voice enough to make her wishes plain to Leon, who now opened the double doors and scowled at Bern.

Bern nodded sadly, at neither one of them, and walked toward the doorway. Just before leaving, he turned and said, "I'm staying at the Rutherford Inn. I'll be there another two days if you feel like getting in touch with me. I don't suppose you will, but I thought you ought to know."

Leon went with him to his car. Bern took one final look at the house and climbed inside. Leon obliged him by closing the door, hard. "How come there are eight pillars?" Bern asked him.

"The roof was sagging," Leon said grudgingly. "Had to put two more columns on. Why? You in the construction business?"

"I'm more interested in landscaping. Like boxwood hedges."

"We took them out," Leon said. "Too damn much trouble keeping them trimmed. I got to go inside now."

But he waited until Bern drove away. Then he returned to the living room and found the old woman where he left her. He didn't like the way she looked. It was too much like the old days when she had gone weeks on end without speaking. Then she looked up at him and said:

"Get me Greenfingers."

The Rutherford Inn was properly colonial on the outside, but someone had decided to modernize the bar in rosewood and chrome. There were only four occupants when Bern entered, including the bartender, a cadaverous man with sunken cheeks and a fixed, incongruous smile. He gave Bern the Scotch-rocks he requested, and Bern carried it to an imitation-leather banquette and sat down. He had sipped half of it when he became aware that the man at the end of the bar, a man in his late fifties, was looking at him. He was a big man, almost wide enough to cover two barstools. The look was pleasantly inquisitive and Bern knew he would soon have company.

"Buster Driscoll," the big man said with a gap-toothed smile. "Just get into town?"

"This morning," Bern said.

"I know you're not from the catalogue company," Driscoll said. "I already asked. I've been expecting this joker for the past week, but he hasn't shown yet." He chuckled at Bern's blank stare. "I'm in the nursery business—got a big stand of Christmas trees, the biggest in the state. This catalogue guy had a crazy idea he could sell them by mail-order, said he wanted to come talk about it."

He waited until Bern felt obliged to tell him his name. Then the big man sat down, wrapping his big hand around a glass of beer. His fingernails were dirty. "Let me guess," he said. "You're an insurance adjuster."

"Why would you think that?"

"The way I knew you wasn't the catalogue man. Pete Humboldt, Mrs. Markey's gardener, told me you went out to see Mrs. Markey. Her old stables burned down last week, so I figured you came to settle the claim. Wrong, huh?"

"Yes, I had other business with Mrs. Markey."

"That's interesting. I thought I was about the only person in town the old lady would give the time of day. She's a regular hermit, you know."

"So I understand." Bern looked up into the man's broad, open face. "I heard it had something to do with her son's death. A long time ago."

"Thirty years ago," Driscoll said promptly. "I was there, believe it or not—I was a rookie with the police force. It was the first time I ever saw a dead body. Almost decided I picked the wrong career."

"Did you quit?"

"Oh, I stuck it out," Driscoll smiled. "Retired after twenty with a pension. Saw a whole lot of dead bodies, but never forgot the sight of that poor little dead boy soaking wet on the grass. Or the way his mother carried on when they told her he was gone. She didn't believe it. Kept screaming at everybody to keep trying to resuscitate the kid. It was no use, of course—he'd been in that icy lakewater for a good thirty minutes."

"A terrible tragedy," Bern said, without emotion.

"Little boy was everything to Mrs. Markey. She was what—thirty-three, thirty-four when she had him? These late mothers are the worst."

"But there was another son, too."

"Another husband, too. One of these no-good, fortune-hunter types. He took some of her money, she kept the son. His name was Roman. He was already ten years old when David was born, kind of used to being the star of the family—the little prince, you know? You can imagine what happened when Mommy brought home that bundle from the hospital."

"They call it sibling rivalry," Bern said.

"They can call it anything they damn well please," the big man said. "Me, I call it just plain *hate*, what Roman felt for his little brother. Everybody in town saw it. Except little David Paul, of course. David Paul, he grew up thinking that Roman Markey was God on earth, followed him around like a runty little shadow. Roman was more than a big brother, on account of Mr. Markey dying when David was still a baby. They tried to cut out that bad lung of his, but he died on the operating table. So Roman became David's daddy as well as his brother and he didn't like it much. Can I buy you another drink?"

"I was about to make you the same offer."

Driscoll grinned. "I never refuse a free beer."

When his big hands were around his second glass, he said: "I'll tell you one thing, though. I never believed the story that went around, what people said about the way the boy drowned. Never told Mrs. Markey that. She made up her mind and nobody could change it. She's convinced it was Roman who pushed his little brother through that thin ice on that frozen lake—that he stood by and watched him go down without lifting a finger."

"My God," Bern said.

"There weren't any witnesses, at least nobody near enough to see it happen. But the old lady—she wasn't old then, of course—she just

happened to look out the upstairs window and saw them together. It was a distance, and she wore glasses even then, but after David drowned she swore she saw Roman push him. I don't mean swore at the inquest or anything—she kept her mouth closed then. But she must have told somebody, because the whole town started whispering about it, and then she sent Roman away to some kind of boarding school. He never came back, not once. The way she cut him off, he was as dead to her as the little boy. And everybody knows that he won't get a nickel of her money when the old lady passes."

"It's a sad story," Bern said. "But thanks for telling me."

"Maybe you got a better story," Driscoll said, showing the gaps in his teeth again. "This business you had with Mrs. Markey—is it confidential? I don't want to sound nosy or anything, though I guess I do."

"It was personal," Bern said.

"Well—just in case it has anything to do with landscaping—" Driscoll smiled and handed him his business card. The name of his nursery was Greenfingers.

When the invitation arrived, in the form of a briefly worded message at the front desk, Bern shaved and showered so quickly he still felt damp when he rang the doorbell of the Markey house.

This time, Leon was wearing a dark coat and a badly knotted tie, but as he escorted Bern into the living room his manner was just as irascible. Everything looked exactly the same as it had the day before, right down to the cold teacup and the wilting roses, although the robe Mrs. Markey wore was now pale-green. The other difference was that she asked Bern to sit down.

"Your name is apparently Bernard Secombe," she said drily, "just as you said. And you do indeed work for Resnor Resorts in Boston. You're single, you were thirty years old on the date you gave me, and you have no immediate relations. You also have no police record."

Bern smiled. "Mr. Driscoll?"

"He's a friend of the family. Of course, the facts he supplied don't guarantee that you're not up to some mischief."

"You called me that, too."

"What?"

"In my dreams. You called me Little Mischief."

For a moment, he thought the old lady was going to be ill. She put her hand to her mouth and muffled a sound.

"I'm sorry," Bern said. "I can't seem to help myself. Something in me wants to convince you I'm not lying."

"Convince me, then!" she said, her voice trembling between anger and bitterness. "Tell me how you knew this dream mother of yours was me! We're a long way from Providence, Rhode Island—tell me how this wonderful spiritual transformation took place, how you suddenly knew where your house was located!"

"I didn't know. I didn't have any idea until just a few weeks ago. There was an article in *Newsweek* about women in politics. There was a photograph of you taken around 1952, when you declared yourself a candidate for Congress. I'm sure you remember that."

"I remember how pleased my father was," she said drily, "when I lost in the primary."

"The picture hit me like a blow to the stomach," Bern said. "It was a face I'd been seeing all my life. I knew you had to be the one I dreamed about all the time, especially when I read the short biography in the article, when I read about you having lost one of your two sons."

"I lost both my sons," Mrs. Markey said.

"That wasn't the thought that crossed my mind. I *have* to say this, Mrs. Markey. The thought that crossed my mind was that both of your sons are still alive."

He didn't want to see her reaction, so he got up from the sofa and walked to the fireplace. "It wasn't hard to find you after that. I found out where this house was, and that you were still living in it. It took me almost a month to get up the nerve to write that letter."

There were two photographs on the mantelpiece, framed in silver—both of a blond-haired boy at ages four and seven. He stared at them and said, "I don't look anything like David, I know that. Not like anyone in your family. All the connections are inside me, inside my head. I dreamed—remembered—whatever you want to believe—the same childhood. Every illness, every happiness, every sadness. When I was four years old, I had whooping cough. Lots of kids get it. You made me laugh about it. You told me about the whooping crane. I used to hop around the house on one leg, laughing. I remember Christmases. A toy truck that crashed into the baseboards and rolled over and righted itself. For some reason, that truck terrified me. It alarmed me so much you got rid of it. But *he* found it again, my big brother, and he used to open my bedroom door in the middle of the night and send the truck into my room."

Aghast, she said: "Did Roman really do that?"

"I never told you about it. I never wanted to complain about him. I wanted him to like me—to love me."

"Oh, dear God," Mrs. Markey said, looking chilled and older.

"You carried me too much, you pampered me. Grandfather said you were going to make a girl out of me. I was horrified when I heard him say that! I cried for hours—I didn't want to be a girl! I punched you—"

"Yes," the woman cried, tears rolling from beneath the thick lenses. "You wouldn't let me pick you up after that day!"

"And I missed it, I missed it so much. But I had to be a man, like my brother was, so I could be his friend, so he would take me the places he went."

"And he did once. Tell me about that time I left you two alone. Damn you, tell me what happened when he sneaked you out of the house and maybe I'll start believing in miracles—"

"He took me to a place near the railroad," Bern said. "To a room over the old abandoned station. There were two girls there. They were drinking. They smelled sweet and sour at the same time. Two more boys showed up later. The girls made a fuss over me, fondled me, kissed me—I started to cry and kick them. Finally he took me home."

"He never told me," Mrs. Markey said. "Roman never admitted where he'd been. But I remember how your clothes smelled! Like beer—and cigarettes—and cheap perfume!"

"I knew you'd be angry with him, so I couldn't tell the truth. I couldn't let him blame me for his being punished. Can you understand that? I know it's a very long time ago, but can you understand?"

"Yes—of course I do!" Then she gasped as she realized she was forgiving a man who hadn't even been born until her son died.

He had trouble finding the place among the depressed streets of downtown Detroit. It was called Moniker's, but the sign, when he finally spotted it, was so greyed over by time and dirt it was barely legible. The long narrow room was dark, a tactic designed to hide the grime. Surprisingly—it was only four in the afternoon—every bar stool was occupied, and three of the five booths.

The man he came to see waved to him from the farthestmost enclosure. Bern was amused to see that he wore dark glasses despite the gloom. It gave him a menacing look, like a henchman in a gangster movie. He seemed to enjoy playing the role, even though he was

actually a businessman, a minor executive of a large company. "Well?" he said. He didn't greet Bern or offer him a drink. He just peered over the dark rims of his glasses as Bern sat down. He was nervous, of course, as Bern had known he would be. Bern himself was calm.

"It's all right," he said, pleased by the understatement.

"'All right,'" the man repeated, grinding his teeth. "And just what does all right mean?"

"She believes me. She believes *in* me." He caught the waiter's eye and ordered a Scotch. When he left, Bern said, "She cried in my arms, and I started to cry, too. I almost believed it all myself, every word of it, which is just what you said I should do. You were right, absolutely right."

"Yes," the man said, expelling a long breath. "Yes."

"We talked for an hour afterward. I emptied the whole bag of tricks. I told her everything else I remembered from my dreams, everything you told me about the childhood of David Paul. All the pet names, the childhood illnesses, your rivalry. The dog story really got to her. But you didn't get the name right. It wasn't Tiger, it was Tigger—something out of *Winnie the Pooh*. It didn't do any harm though. By that time she wanted to believe so much that nothing mattered."

"And now what?" the man said. "What did you say you wanted from her?"

"I said I wanted nothing, I said I was only happy that I knew the truth—that *she* knew it. I said I felt at peace for the first time in my life." He twisted his mouth ruefully. "And you know something? It was almost true."

The waiter brought his drink. Suddenly Bern realized he didn't want it. He spun the glass on the wet plastic tabletop and said, "I told her I was going to leave the next morning, go back to my job in Boston. I suggested that maybe we could stay in touch—a post-card now and then."

"*Leave? Stay in touch?* You damned idiot! Why did you say that?"

"Psychology," Bern said with a bitter smile. "The subconscious."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing. I knew she wouldn't be satisfied with that. She cried and cried and said I mustn't leave her. She said she couldn't bear losing her David Paul a second time."

"And then?"

"I told her I'd come back, that I'd try to visit her once in a while, but that I had to be practical. I had a job, I had to earn a living. She said that was ridiculous and unnecessary, that God didn't want us to be separated, that God must have meant us to be reunited, to be together—that's why he'd sent David's soul to me, why he'd sent me those dreams. She used God's name quite a bit. You never told me your mother was so religious."

"She was *mystical*," Roman Markey said. "That's how I remember her. That's why I thought it might work."

They talked for another hour, only now Roman did most of the talking. He began dredging up memories, just as he had done so diligently three months before, when the idea had sprung into his head, when he had seen those names scrolling on his computer monitor—the long list of Rescor employees whose Benefits status was his responsibility as assistant personnel administrator of the company. There were half a dozen born on January 28, 1961, but only one who was even vaguely qualified for the scheme he had in mind—for the notion that sometimes seemed brilliant and other times lunatic. But when he arranged to befriend Bern Secombe, when he recognized a man with failed dreams and a flexible conscience, he gave it another word. Feasible. Yes.

He had brought him along slowly. They had gotten drunk together—only Roman's drinking had been carefully calculated. He had told Bern the unhappy story of his past, of his disownment. He had wept for his own innocence, swearing that his half brother's death had been an accident but finally admitting to a sin of omission. He had done nothing when the ice cracked ominously beneath their feet and David Paul had floundered in the icy water of Pontoon Lake. He hadn't deserved the wrath that descended on him, the banishment to a distant education, the paltry remittances that saw him into his adult years and then abruptly ended. He was a deposed prince, and the kingdom would never be his. Unless—

"Unless what?" Bern had finally asked.

"Unless I'm forgiven," Roman had told him. "Unless the queen changes her mind and calls the prince home."

It was six-thirty in the evening now. The bar of Moniker's was just as crowded, but the people had changed. The new shift was noisier, more argumentative. A jukebox was playing. Roman Markey was drunk now, but this time Bern had calculated his own level of intoxication. His voice was clear and steady as he told his confederate the best news yet.

"I'm moving into the house," he said. "She asked me to move in with her and I said I would."

"My God," Roman said, "that's fantastic! Why didn't you tell me that right away?" A dark thought crossed his mind. "Don't even think of playing games with me, Bern, about double-crossing me! Don't try to take advantage of this situation! I could expose you as a fake in two minutes—"

"I know that. I wouldn't do anything like that. There's only one way to handle this, and that's your way. I'll move into the house and there'll be plenty of opportunity for me to plead your case, to tell her that she was wrong about what happened that day, that you did everything you could to save my life, that it means everything to me that my big brother come home again. She won't turn me down, I'm sure of it."

"No," Roman said exultantly, "she won't! I know she won't! There's nothing she wouldn't do if David asked her!" He grasped Bern's arm, hurting him in his excitement. "It can be anytime, Bern, anytime. There's nothing to hold me here. No family, no woman, not even friends. I could pack up and leave in an hour once you sent me the word."

"I'll do my best," Bern said.

"You won't regret it, I swear you won't. When I'm rich, you'll be rich, too. Just get me home again, that's all I ask! Bring me home!"

Lily and Millie, the twin maids, weren't surprised when Mrs. Markey gave them the weekend off. They were as indifferent to calendars as they were to clocks and they simply assumed that some kind of legal holiday was impending. Their mother lived in Lansing and they couldn't wait to get there and clean her house, too.

Leon was more of a problem. He was naturally suspicious of every deviation in the routine. He had grumbled incessantly when the stranger had moved in the month before, but he soon recognized that Mrs. Markey had some kind of emotional attachment to the man that may have been stronger than her devotion to him. Leon was anything if not practical and the thought of being severed from service at his age was terrifying. He kept his grumbling down to a low rumble, and when Mrs. Markey told him to take a few days off he didn't argue. He had a niece who had a boarding house in Flint and he liked to play cards with her guests.

They would be alone when Roman came home . . .

That morning the house was so quiet that Bern became aware of clocks he had never known existed. They had lunch on the terrace and Mrs. Markey prepared it herself. She wore a gold-threaded robe that came to the floor. She seemed to glide across the tiles as she walked. Bern wore a blue-cashmere sweater she had bought him the week before. Actually, she had bought three and he had protested her extravagance. She had smiled, pleased by her own indulgence: it had been a long time since she had enjoyed spending money.

He was surprised that she didn't seem nervous, and spoke about it.

"No," Mrs. Markey said, "I feel perfectly all right, David. I'm sure this is the right thing to do. It should have been done a long time ago."

"But if you change your mind—" He didn't finish the sentence.

"I won't," she assured him.

They didn't hear the sound of the approaching car until the sun was almost beyond the horizon. It was a small car and the trunk had obviously not been large enough for the luggage it contained; there were suitcases piled in the rear seat. When it stopped in the driveway, Roman didn't emerge for a full minute. He must have been staring at the house, absorbing the wonder of the moment, of the homecoming. When he finally stepped out, the setting sun cast a long shadow across the lawn.

"I'll go now," Bern said.

Mrs. Markey started to climb the stairs to the second floor, lifting her gold-threaded robe as she walked. Bern went into the hallway and picked up the silver-headed cane in the leather receptacle at the front door. He went outside, and without seeing his face he knew Roman was smiling at him.

He doubled his pace to add momentum to his swing as he lifted the cane and smashed the heavy handle against Roman's left temple. He had been concerned that two blows might be necessary, but one was enough to make Roman's legs collapse under him. He lay in the driveway, alive but motionless.

Luckily, the billiard-green lawn sloped sharply toward the water, so dragging the body took less effort than Bern had anticipated. It was more trouble getting him into the rowboat, but he accomplished that, too.

When he was in the middle of the lake, he looked up toward the lighted window on the second floor, and only when he saw the small dark silhouette of Mrs. Markey—of his mother—did he slide David Paul's unpunished murderer into the dark and silent depths.



DETECTIVERSE

GRATITUDE

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

Said old Frank to his nephew, Ralph Rowes,
"You *know* you're my heir, I suppose?"
Ralph fawned; "What can I do
To show my thanks to you?"
"Take your foot off my oxygen hose!"

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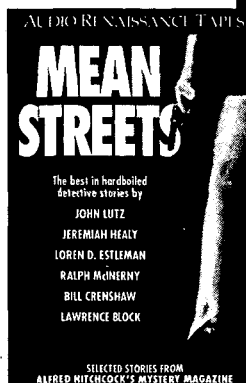
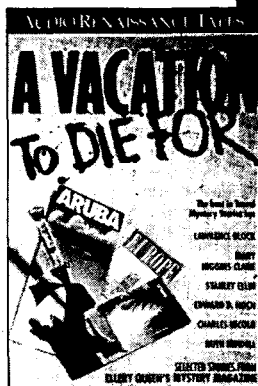
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a **NEW** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Cousin Deloss's strong calloused brown fingers stroked the coffin's burnished lid. "Black walnut. Cut the tree myself, an' me an' Aylmer an' my boy Delbert we all made the coffin. Purty, ain't it? No cheap pine for good ole Vern. He deserved better . . ."

BODY OF EVIDENCE

by **DONALD OLSON**

Charlotte was sadly aware that neither conscience nor respect for the dead influenced her husband Rowley's decision to make the long trip to Green Grove for his brother Vernon's funeral. Vernon was dead and Rowley held a mortgage on the farm—and he meant to have it understood by the widow that death did not cancel her obligations. Or so he told Charlotte.

That he might tear up the mortgage and give the farm to Alberta, he regarded as one of Charlotte's more scatterbrained ideas. As he put it: "I didn't get where I am today by giving away my assets."

"Preacher's Creek Farm is hardly an asset," she had argued. "What earthly good would it be to you?"

Rowley's beefy, pink-toned face with its perpetually cynical expression of a Santa Claus who no longer believes in children acquired a cagey, secretive look. "That's for me to know and you to find out. You and the rest of 'em."

"He was your *brother*, for God's sake."

"He was a fool, with no more ambition than a hillbilly."

If no longer surprised, Charlotte could still be appalled by her husband's insensitivity. "Giving Alberta the farm might at least create a *semblance* of remorse."

"What the hell do you mean, remorse?"

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"You know perfectly well what I mean."

For a moment he looked as if he truly hated her. "Don't start that again. There was no guarantee it would have saved his life. My own doctor told me that. We could both have ended up dead."

Charlotte wondered why she even bothered trying to pierce the elephant hide of his ego. "If you'd talked to your Aunt Affie yourself when she phoned, you'd realize what *their* sentiments are."

"Hillbillies, the lot of them! What do they know about medical risks? I'll soon set 'em straight if they get shirty with me!"

Unless you were to drop in from the sky, the only way *into* the village of Green Grove once you cross Razorback Ridge is by a twisting dirt road called the Crooked S—the only other way out by an even more precipitous one called the Dugway. Primitive in its isolation and folkways, Green Grove and the rocky, pine-wooded farmland around Preacher's Creek appeared to Charlotte from within the air-conditioned Lincoln towncar as being quite as wild and exotic as a remote corner of the Himalayas, a brutal country supporting a way of life she could only faintly imagine from the distance of her lofty condominium penthouse. That her husband's roots lay in the hard soil of such a country she felt might explain something of his own unyielding toughness, his thick-skinned arrogance, his pride at having escaped into another world. Even if that escape had been made at the sacrifice of certain finer qualities Charlotte had once admired in him.

They stopped briefly in Green Grove to pick up Aunt Affie at her little cottage next to the graveyard. To Charlotte the old lady seemed not to have changed in ten years—the same pale, expansive face, furrowed and double-chinned but unruined by age. She kissed Charlotte sweetly on the cheek while bestowing only the faintest smile of greeting on Rowley. The room smelled agreeably of freshly baked pastries.

"Pies and apple bread for after the funeral tomorrow. My stars, I'm fit to perish in that furnace of a kitchen. Sit yourselves down, my dears—I'll fetch you some cold lemonade."

From his expression as she turned away, Rowley would clearly have preferred a shot of the moonshine whiskey for which the old lady had always been famous, along with her fabled herbal remedies.

"You all could just as well stayed here tonight," she said as she handed them their drinks, "but Alberta and Cousin Deloss was set

an' determined we all must stay at the farm. Hope you won't feel queer, Vernon bein' laid out in the parlor like he is, poor soul. It's what the family wanted. More fittin' to their way of thinkin' than bein' laid out at the undertaker's in Kilbuck."

"Long as *we* don't have to sleep in the parlor," said Rowley with a crude attempt at humor.

Aunt Affie chuckled. "No fear. Alberta's puttin' you all in her and Vernon's room."

That she and Rowley should be welcome even to step foot in the farmhouse implied to Charlotte an extraordinary forbearance under the circumstances. "Aunt Affie, what you said on the phone—I mean, about the way they all feel."

"Oh, pshaw, don't you fret yourselves none about that. Grief talkin', that's all it was. My stars, we all know Vernon and Rowley ain't been close for years. Different as chalk and cheese, them two. Always was. Not that I'm not sayin' they wasn't a bit put out at first when the doctors over there at the Center told 'em it was kidney failure and only a transplant from a—what did they call it, a sibling?—could save his life and it pained 'em when Rowley refused to donate one of his."

Rowley set down his glass with unnecessary force. "As I've explained to Charlotte, Aunt Affie, it would have meant a calculated risk. I'm not a young man. My heart's had two or three little flutters and I'm on medication for hypertension. And remember, I've got a business to run. People depend on me for their bread and butter. Hell, I couldn't afford to be laid up for God knows how long even if the surgery was successful—and there was no guarantee it would be. I hope you understand that."

Aunt Affie's wise old eyes twinkled with good humor. "Oh, I do, Rowley, I do. And I reckon they will, too, once they stop grievin'."

Clouds and memory reshape the landscape, and so Charlotte recalled nothing familiar from that one previous visit on a sunny day ten years earlier—not until they crossed the bridge over turbulent Preacher's Creek and passed through rocky hills thick with sassafras and mountain laurel into open country where, beyond windwaves of tall grass, the farm came into view—tumbledown barns and a faded brick house spiked with lightning rods, a broad veranda, and high narrow windows painted a flaking mustard yellow. Overhead, the lowering sky seemed full of angry crows. Or were they starlings? Charlotte felt again the misgivings that had troubled her before the trip began.

In the parlor, the clotted air was thick with the scent of flowers heaped around the closed coffin resting on a long oak library table at one end of the room. Charlotte, aware of eyes turning at their entrance, steeled herself for a palpable wave of hostility and was relieved when her gaze met nothing more disquieting than a reflection of the same look of bereavement with which the widow had welcomed them. Alberta stood beside them now, a lanky, fleshless woman with weathered features and straw-colored hair bound tightly to her skull.

"You'll be wantin' to see him," she murmured, and when neither of them moved they were nudged forward by Cousin Deloss, a heavy-jawed, slope-shouldered giant of a man.

His strong calloused brown fingers stroked the coffin's burnished lid. "Black walnut. Cut the tree myself, an' me an' Aylmer an' my boy Delbert we all made the coffin. Purty, ain't it? No cheap pine for good ole Vern. He deserved better."

With an effortless motion, he raised the lid. Charlotte gasped. For one terrible instant she thought some ghastly mistake had been made, for surely the waxen figure in the coffin couldn't be the same brawny farmer she remembered but some shrunk effigy, seemingly without fleshly substance—a youth's body in a man's shiny blue suit, the folded hands all but hidden by the too-long sleeves.

"Skin an' bones," said Alberta. "Just skin an' bones at the end. Couldn't show him like that. He'd not want that, proud like he was."

Rowley made a noise in his throat and turned away.

The heat, the stifling reek of flowers and sweat, the pressure of emotion left Charlotte feeling giddy. She had to rest her hand on the coffin's edge. Cousin Deloss gently removed it and lowered the lid.

"Please," whispered Charlotte, "I must get some air."

On the veranda, she leaned against the rail and looked out over the wind-waves of grass, breathing deeply. She wished now she had stayed at home as Rowley had urged. Even Aunt Affie on the phone had tried to dissuade her from making the trip, as if wishing to spare her what she'd implied might be a distressing confrontation between the mourning family and the brother they blamed for Vernon's death.

Charlotte knew that she had chosen to come with Rowley out of some lingering sense of wifely duty, some desire to lend him moral support in the face of an animosity which, thank goodness, seemed

to have evaporated before their arrival. Or was it her presence, she wondered, that restrained any open demonstration of resentment?

"Delbert!" cried Cousin Deloss. "Y'all come away from that machine!"

He smiled at Charlotte. "Youngun's never saw a car like that before."

A weedy, whey-faced lad with tow-colored hair and enormous periwinkle-blue eyes looked up at them blankly before slouching away, scuffing his bare feet in the yellow dust of the driveway.

"I don't remember the boy," said Charlotte.

Aunt Affie reminded her that Delbert wasn't much more than a babe in arms when they were last at the farm.

"You want him to," said Cousin Deloss, "the boy'll wash down that machine of yours and polish it up right smart. Shoulda saw the way he rubbed the polish into that black-walnut coffin. Made it shine like it come right out of a factory. Vern, he thought the world of that boy."

If any ill-feeling was going to arise, Charlotte expected it to surface when the whole clan gathered around the massive round oak table for dinner: Alberta, Cousin Deloss and his wife Letty and son Delbert, gnarled white-haired Uncle Aylmer with his wife Birdella and lummoX of a son Casper, Aunt Affie, and three or four other relatives whose names Charlotte couldn't recall.

As the seemingly endless stream of dishes heaped with starchy food circled the table, Charlotte waited for someone to say the wrong word, open the gates of malice, provoke the squabble she felt couldn't be avoided indefinitely, for she knew these were not the sort of people to mask their true feelings. Social hypocrisy would be quite out of character.

As the meal progressed without even the slightest disturbance, however, Charlotte began to feel that everyone was behaving as if she and Rowley were not really there, or there only in the sense that the corpse in the parlor was present—were being treated not with hostility but with the same silent, pious regard accorded to the deceased. Such polite deference baffled Charlotte. Did she really know these people at all? She felt an urge to demand loudly, "Why don't you say what you must be thinking?"

That Rowley, on the other hand, perceived nothing unnatural in this absence of hostility was clear to Charlotte from his display of down-home, folksy good fellowship, seemingly oblivious of his fail-

ure to attract more than a polite attention to his stream of reminiscences recalling his boyhood on the farm. Only when he startled her as the meal drew to a close by suddenly tapping his spoon against his water glass, like a master of ceremonies at one of his lodge dinners imploring silence where in this case it already reigned, did Charlotte realize that all his falsely nostalgic banter had been leading up to something.

Clearing his throat, Rowley started to rise, then subsided into his chair, satisfied that he had everyone's attention.

"Now then, folks, long as we're all gathered here together, I wanna take the opportunity to spring a little surprise on you all. Big news. *Good* news. News about a certain project I've had simmering on the back burner for a long time. Not even my good wife Charlotte here knows a thing about it.

"You all know I hold a mortgage on Preacher's Creek Farm and you all know I never made a fuss about Vernon and Alberta being in default on the payments. I know the bind they've been in ever since Vernon took sick. Now, Charlotte, bless her generous soul, suggested I tear up that mortgage and give Alberta title to the property. I'm sure the rest of you agree that would be a Christian thing to do.

~~"Well, folks, that's *not* what I'm gonna do."~~

He paused for effect and gazed around the table. ~~"What I *am* gonna do is foreclose on that mortgage. For Alberta's sake and everyone else's at this table. What I *am* gonna do is bring prosperity to Preacher's Creek like you never dreamed possible. I'm gonna turn Preacher's Creek into one of the finest hunting, fishing, and recreational resorts this side of the Appalachians. There's gold in these here hills, folks, and I don't mean the kind you mine for. I mean the kind all those fat cats out there beyond the Ridge will bring into Green Grove and Preacher's Creek.~~

"Folks, we'll have 'em swarmin' over Razorback Ridge in droves. I've already lined up a team of big-city backers who realize the potential of this unspoiled paradise. Folks, if Vernon could hear what I'm saying he'd sit right up in that black-walnut coffin and shout *hoo-ray*! I'm gonna put Preacher's Creek on the map, folks, and you're all going to share in the profits!"

If the unspeakably wicked conjecture that had lodged in her mind as she listened to Rowley's carnival barker's pitch was more than suspicion, then Charlotte knew that her marriage had ended. For

years she had turned a blind eye to Rowley's dubious financial manipulations, his shady deals, and his corrupt business practices, telling herself they had nothing to do with her, that such evils formed the basis of the society in which she lived. But this—this she couldn't accept and still delude herself that she remained morally unsoiled and innocent.

In the big bedroom, with its water-stained, rose-patterned wallpaper and double brass bed, she stayed silent as Rowley boasted of the ease with which he had captivated "that bunch of dumb hill-billies."

"They were all agog, you notice that? Primitives, that what you called them? Nothin' primitive about their instincts when it comes to the smell of money!"

Agog? Not quite the word Charlotte would have used to describe what had struck her as being a universal mood of submissive acquiescence, tinged—although that might have been her imagination—with a sardonic amusement. "You were born here," she said, "but I don't think you've a clue in the world what they're really like."

"Baloney. As I recall, you were the one tried to make me believe we'd be met by a lynching party if we came over the Ridge. You call that a lynching party?"

"Rowley, look at me. Look me straight in the eye and tell me the truth. You never consulted any doctor about that kidney transplant, did you? You cooked up this scheme of yours for Preacher's Creek when Vernon first got sick. Maybe long before then. If Vernon had lived, you'd have had to drop the idea. So you let him die. You might have saved his life, but you didn't want him to live, did you? You didn't want him to spoil your plans."

Rowley's explosion of outrage might have fooled her if she hadn't caught that first swift, panicky glance toward the bedroom door, followed by an angry hush-your-fool-mouth look. Charlotte knew in her heart that that was the precise moment her marriage ended.

Before either of them could say more, there came a light tap on the door. Charlotte went to open it. Aunt Affie beamed at her, a tray in her hands holding two steaming cups. "Reckoned as how you all might have trouble gettin' to sleep in a strange bed. My own herbal tea, guaranteed to work better than any drugstore concoction."

Charlotte took the tray. "Thank you, Aunt Affie, how sweet of you."

"Now drink it down, both of you, and I'll take the cups back to the kitchen."

Rowley started to protest, but Charlotte gave him a look and with an air of resignation he drained the cup. Wishing them sweet dreams, the old lady collected the cups, kissed Charlotte on the cheek, and padded away.

Whatever was in the brew worked like magic. Charlotte had never before drifted so swiftly into a deep and dreamless slumber—from which she awakened to find the sun already halfway up the sky. Her body felt curiously weightless on the bed, steeped in a delicious lassitude as she turned her head to discover Rowley had already risen and left the room.

The door opened and Aunt Affie appeared. "You all awake, lamb?"

Slowly Charlotte pushed away the sheet. "Goodness, how late is it?"

"Goin' onto eleven. Your hubby was up and dressed hours ago. Had his breakfast and went out to tramp around his domain."

"I didn't hear him. You really must tell me the secret of that sleeping potion. An army could have marched through here and I wouldn't have heard a thing." Charlotte welcomed the chance to speak to Aunt Affie alone. "I was amazed how willingly the family accepted Rowley's plan for turning Preacher's Creek into a tourist mecca. Frankly, I would have expected strong opposition."

Aunt Affie moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "Folks've got to be practical, lamb."

"But not even a murmur of protest. Preacher's Creek Farm is Alberta's home, and Cousin Deloss's. I wonder if they don't realize what it's likely to mean to them all."

"Oh, I reckon as they do."

"Believe me, I had no idea what was in his mind. I really did try to persuade him to give the farm to Alberta."

"You're a livin' angel, lamb. But don't you fret yourself none about it. What must be must be. Now I'll skedaddle and let you get dressed. Funeral's at two, so we won't fuss none about lunch. Folks'll be comin' back here from the cemetery for eats."

It wasn't until she'd had her coffee and gone for a fairly long walk as far as the creek and back that Charlotte began to worry about Rowley's absence.

Cousin Deloss didn't share her concern. "Rowley ain't likely to get hisself lost. He ain't no stranger to these hills an' he was set on

coverin' the whole spread. Like as not he's scoutin' out sites for all them ski runs and such like he was jawin' about. He'll show up in time for the funeral."

But he didn't, nor was there any sign of him when Charlotte, who had driven Aunt Affie and two of the cousins to the cemetery in the Lincoln, arrived back at the farm.

A search party was organized, to no avail. Not until just before dusk, when Delbert and one of his cousins came racing back to the farm bursting with excitement over their discovery on the rocky creek bank two miles south of the farm, did Cousin Deloss phone the sheriff's office in Kilbuck.

Charlotte identified the single shoe the boys had found as being without doubt one of Rowley's.

The sheriff offered little hope. "Based on the body of evidence—and I know it's slim—it appears your husband must have slipped and fallen into the creek, ma'am. Runs pretty swift down through the ravine, and deep in spots. If he got swept into the reservoir, chances are his body might never be found. Water's seventy feet deep back of the dam."

The kindness of the family overwhelmed Charlotte. Used as she was to the artful hypocrisies of her own social acquaintances, she found this openheartedness as refreshing as the mountain air. Who would have expected such tactful regard for her feelings? And never a whisper of disappointment that Rowley's project would never now bring prosperity to Preacher's Creek, nor of relief that outsiders would never violate its peaceful tranquility. It was she who felt like a hypocrite, feigning a deeper sense of loss, a more genuine grief, than she could bring herself to feel. How uncanny that just when she knew her marriage to Rowley had ended, fate had conveniently removed him from her life.

Charlotte stayed on for a week at the farm, ostensibly in hopes Rowley's body might be recovered, but actually because she needed time away from the distractions of the city to adjust her mind to a vision of her life as a widow.

When the time did come to leave, she wasn't allowed to go away empty-handed. The back seat of the car was loaded with gifts: two lovely handstitched quilts, a hamper of preserved jams and jellies, a box of Aunt Affie's herbs, a lambswool rug loomed by Uncle Aylmer, a polished walnut sewing cabinet made by Cousin Deloss

and Delbert from the coffin's leftover lumber. Charlotte could only assume the family felt obliged, each in his own way, to offer a gift of atonement, as if they all felt somehow responsible for the tragedy that had left her a widow. Their simple generosity moved her to tears as she said goodbye.

Delbert, at the last minute, begged shyly to ride into Green Grove with Charlotte and Aunt Affie.

"You surely may," smiled Charlotte, who had taken a fancy to the boy. He looked not unlike pictures she'd been shown of Rowley as a boy. "There's always room for one more."

Delbert giggled as they drove away. "That's just what Uncle Aylmer said when we was all workin' on Uncle Vernon's coffin. Paw said, 'You sure there's gonna be room enough?' And Uncle Aylmer, he's funny, he picked me up and made like as he was gonna put me in the coffin and he said, 'There's always room for one more.'"

Aunt Affie poked him in the ribs. "Now you just shut your mouth, child." It was the first time Charlotte had heard the old lady utter a sharp word.

The boy's remark, harmless enough in itself, lingered in Charlotte's mind, seemed to crystalize into thought what until then had remained no more than ripples of uncertainty.

Room enough? Charlotte recalled her shock at the sight of that shrunken body in the depths of the black-walnut coffin.

Always room for one more? A vision of those burly pallbearers, shoulders borne down by the weight of the coffin as they struggled up the knoll to the gravesite. So much effort for so slight a burden. And the single shoe—how convenient a discovery.

Out of nowhere, and seemingly without relevance, a fragment of remembered poetry passed through Charlotte's mind. "And where-soe'er they went, like Juno's swans, still they went coupled and inseparable."

The words prompted her to speak, curious as to how the old lady would respond. "Aunt Affie, please tell me the truth. Where do you think Rowley is right now?"

A moment's thoughtful silence, and then, sadly: "Take my word for it as a Christian woman, lamb. Wherever they are, Vernon and Rowley, you can be sure they're in the same place."

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

The young man looked at the woman behind the wheel. "Yeah, you're hard-working like my mother. She did for us kids like you do for yours. She had hard-working hands like yours." His eyes narrowed. "Your husband good to you?"

Jan Carol Sabin, whose first published fiction this is, has been a comedy writer and has started a first novel—a mystery, we're happy to report . . .

COLD SWEET DRIZZLE

by JAN CAROL SABIN

The Country Squire station wagon stopped at the corner as the man carrying the grocery bag passed in front. It was one of those cold fall evenings. A drizzle had just started. The car's window wipers, set on its lowest speed, moved across the windows. The woman behind the wheel watched the man cross. He stopped and adjusted his bag so he could carry it better. In the car headlights the woman could see oranges at the top of the bag.

When he reached the curb, she rolled down her window with a push of a button. "Hey, mister," she called out. "You want a ride?"

The man looked at the car and bent over to get a look at the driver. He saw just above the darkened window glass the face of a very pretty woman with blonde hair. He headed back across the street in front of the car and went to the passenger side.

He heard the lock go up and he opened the door. Sticking his head in cautiously, he looked around. With the inside light on, he could see she was alone. She was in her thirties and was wearing a blue dress, jacket, and high heels.

"You going to Old Oaks Trailer Park?" she asked. The trailer park was a couple of miles up the road and he was walking in that direction. There were only woods between the gas station she had

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just pulled out of there, and he was dressed like he belonged in the rundown park.

"Yes, I live there," he said, still looking at her cautiously.

"Put your bag in the back of the wagon. It looks heavy. I'll unlock the tailgate door." She flipped a lever on the dashboard and the lock opened. He went around the back and put his bag in, then hurried back and got into the car. "This is no time to be walking in that cold drizzle," she said as the car pulled off.

"My wife took our car to visit her mother. I got restless and decided to hike to the store and buy oranges. I like them for lunch. Say, this is a new wagon, isn't it?"

She smiled with pride. "My first new car."

He looked at her hands on the wheel. There was a plain gold band on her finger.

"Does your husband know you pick up strangers? It's dangerous, you know, with all these killings going on."

She had studied him before as he had crossed in front of her headlights. He was thin and had on an old denim jacket and worn-looking jeans. He looked like a working man. When he leaned over to look inside the car, she'd noticed he wore no shirt under his jacket, which was buttoned at the bottom. His long blonde hair made him appear to be in his early twenties.

"I didn't think you looked dangerous with your bag of groceries," she said. "Besides, I just heard on the car radio they think it's a woman who's killing those motorists and hitchhikers. It's you that's taking a chance—or do men feel safe because they're men?"

He looked at her hands again and then at her. "I never thought about it." He didn't think her hands matched the fancy car or her dress. They were hard-working hands.

"Maybe that's how I keep the payments up on this big fancy car," she said and laughed. She heard a responsive chuckle from him that sounded rather nervous.

"No, seriously, why did you ask me if I needed a ride?"

Her voice grew solemn. "I know what it is to walk in cold drizzle and have cars pass you by."

"I can't picture any car passing you by," he said. "You'd stop traffic."

"Thank you, kind sir. No, I was a skinny kid then, going barefoot. I had to save my shoes for school. I'd go barefoot even in the cold. I'd walk in cold drizzle barefoot. I got used to the cold. Cars passing me, people I knew—afraid the dirty-looking kid would soil their nice

car seats." Her tone was cold. "I vowed then that someday I'd have a big car, no matter what the cost." She turned her head and looked at him. He was looking straight ahead, serious.

"Your hands look like my mother's did," he said. "She worked in the yard a lot. You have a garden?"

His remark surprised her. "These aren't garden hands." She laughed. "I work parttime nights in a factory production line. Pays more. This way I pay for my car. I have a little girl who goes to kindergarten. We live in an area where we're too close for the school bus to pick her up and too far for a little girl to walk. Now I have this, she won't ever have to walk and have cars pass her."

"Boy, what a relief," he said and took a big breath. "I knew you couldn't be that lady killing and robbing all those people. Listen, would you mind not dropping me at the trailer park? I'll ride with you to town if you're going that way."

"I'll drop you just outside. I turn on Route thirty-three."

"That's okay. I've decided to get a beer and hang out. I'll call my wife later to pick me up. You on your way home or what? You want a beer?"

"On my way to work. Thanks, anyway."

They rode in silence until the car pulled off the road at her turnoff. The young man looked at the woman behind the wheel. "Yeah, you're hard-working like my mother. She did for us kids like you do for yours. She had hard-working hands like yours." His eyes narrowed. "Your husband good to you?"

"He does his best. It's just me wanting a fancy car. I guess you might understand what walking in cold drizzle is like and cars passing you by."

He smiled at her and pulled his jacket together to hide his bare chest. "Yeah. Thanks for the ride. And I wouldn't pick up anyone.—It's hard to believe a woman could cut those people's throats so easily. She must be as strong as a man. That last one put up a fight—had gashes all over her arms, they said." He opened the door and got out.

"Wait!" she called. "Don't forget your bag of groceries!"

He leaned in and smiled at her. "No. You keep it. My present to you." He shut the door and headed off toward the town. As she started to turn onto Route 33, she saw him stop and stand by the side of the road as if he was hitchhiking. She wondered if she should go on or swing by him. She could take him into town and still make her job.

"Where's my wife? Where's Donna? What's happened to her?" The man stood looking anxiously at the police sergeant. He was carrying a little girl whose head was resting on his shoulder. It was after midnight when he received the call. He had quickly gathered up his sleeping daughter and left. His wife had been due home from the factory then. He had waited up for her as he always did on Fridays. They'd have coffee and talk as they could sleep late on Saturday. Now he was standing in a police station holding his sleepy daughter.

The sergeant motioned for the woman on the switchboard to hold the child, who went willingly to sleep on her lap, then showed the man into a room and introduced him to the captain.

"Please, Captain Gorman, what happened? Where's Donna?"

"Mr. Wallace, she's giving her statement to an officer right now. Your wife gave a hitchhiker a ride tonight. She says it was the first time she ever did that."

"Donna never does that," said Joe Wallace nervously, "and she's always telling me not to. I don't understand."

"Mrs. Wallace gave a young man a lift," said Captain Gorman. "Later she had quite a shock. He told her she could have the groceries he was carrying. She found a few oranges on top of a plastic bag. The bag contained a woman's dress drenched in blood. She called us and came right down here. She's shaken but okay."

"Praise be she isn't hurt. I was so afraid something happened to her and no one was telling me!"

"Mr. Wallace, your wife was lucky. She almost went back to take him to town. By then this guy could have changed his mind about letting her go. We've asked your wife to say nothing about this and we need your cooperation. The man could be the highway serial killer posing as a woman carrying a grocery bag. The driver stops to see if she'd like a ride and—"

"I can't believe my wife picked this man up."

"It wasn't smart," said Captain Gorman. "However, your wife does have an idea on the murders. She suggests that the man dresses like a woman and carries his own clothing in the grocery bag. Then after he commits the crime, he changes and puts the dress and woman's shoes back in the bag."

"But why did he leave the bag this time?" asked Joe.

"There was a lot of blood on the dress. He couldn't wear it again. His last victim put up a fight. We think he wanted to tell your wife letting her go was his gift to her."

They spoke for a few minutes more, then they went out to the sergeant's desk, where they found Donna Wallace sitting and holding her sleeping daughter. Her husband embraced them both.

"Why don't you folks leave your station wagon here and I'll have an officer bring it back tomorrow? I'd like to dust that door for his fingerprints. If you don't mind," said Captain Gorman. The Wallaces agreed. The captain and sergeant went to the door with them and watched them walk toward their old car. Joe Wallace was carrying the still-sleeping little girl.

"Lucky lady, Captain. That guy told her she had hands like his mother's. Maybe that's why he didn't kill her. What do you think?"

"Sergeant, I'll tell you what I think. First, we vacuum that whole car for anything we can find. A woman who never picks up strangers doesn't start during a crime wave. I want a report on any nights she didn't show up for work in that factory. And let's see what the lab boys can do with those bloody clothes. I'm looking for hair strands that match hers."

The sergeant looked surprised. "I don't understand."

"Donna Wallace has only been working in that factory for a month. The first murder was a month ago. Her salary doesn't pay for those car payments. I know I couldn't afford to buy that same car for my wife. Joe Wallace earns less than I do and drives a heap. Robbery was the only motive for those killings. And dead people can't make identification."

"But what about that bag and the hitchhiker?"

The captain looked grim. "No doubt she did pick up a man carrying a grocery bag and he left it. That's where she got the idea to put her bloody dress in it. The radio report of a woman suspect must have upset her. Send a man out to that trailer park. I see people on the highway all the time walking to that grocery store from there."

"Captain, if we find him and he says a clerk filled a grocery bag with oranges and that clerk remembers—"

"Donna Wallace will have some explaining. Put a tail on her as well. That's why I let her think I believed her."

"Captain, you've never been wrong yet. What tipped you on her?"

"The shoes," said Captain Gorman. "We didn't tell the news media the woman seen hitchhiking has been carrying her shoes. The shoes in the bag she gave us were well-worn flats." Gorman smiled. "She's a cool one. Suggesting it was a man who did it, and pointing out the shoes were big and a double width that a man could wear. Wouldn't surprise me if some lady at her workplace will find her double-width

shoes missing when she comes to work. Those gals stand on their feet in that plant. Sergeant, our woman was seen walking barefoot in that cold drizzle. How many women would do that? And Donna Wallace—”

They both looked out the door into the cold early-morning drizzle. Donna Wallace turned to look back at them before she got into the car. The captain waved and she waved back. The hand with her shoes in it.



DETECTIVERSE

A THANKSGIVING STORY

by CLARA BRACKETT

Joseph B. Smith was an ornery man.
He snarled from the moment he ate his oat bran.
He chased other women, was stingy with dough,
And gave his wife nothing but misery and woe.
Mrs. Smith finally, fed up with abuse,
Stirred arsenic in the stuffing before cooking his goose.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Works of crime and mystery fiction have employed virtually every specialized background imaginable, giving the more guilt-ridden addicts the chance to point to the field's educational qualities. In recent years, several compilers have attempted subject indexes of mystery fiction, to give two examples Steven Olderr's *Mystery Index* (American Library Association, 1987) and Albert Menendez's *The Subject is Murder* (Garland, 1986; supplement 1990).

Several backgrounds have been particularly attractive to mystery writers and their readers—schools, hospitals, theatres, sports events, trains, ships, churches—but here are two new releases that could not be more dissimilar except for their common setting of a garbage dump.

*** James W. Hall: *Bones of Coral*, Knopf, \$20.00. In a strong example of the kind of contemporary crime novel practiced by Elmore Leonard, Florida paramedic Shaw Chandler is prompted by the apparent suicide of his long-lost father to probe several mysterious deaths somehow connected to retired military officer Douglas Barnes's Waste Management Enterprises. Chandler is a standard-issue brooding hero, but the two other principal characters have more originality: the waste entrepreneur's son Dougie, one of the most memorably drawn psycho-

pathic (or do I mean sociopathic?) killers I've read about recently, and female lead Trula Montoya, a soap-opera star searching for the cause of her multiple sclerosis.

*** Joyce Porter: *Dover Beats the Band*, Foul Play/Countryman, \$17.95. Though Porter died in 1990, she had turned to historical biography in her latter years, and this novel first published in Britain in 1976 is apparently the last about the hilariously obnoxious Scotland Yard detective Wilfred Dover. The dead man found at the Muncaster Municipal Dump is traced to Rankin's Holiday Ranch at Boverville-by-the-Sea and the pernicious doings of a secret society called the Steel Band. The final Dover novel is about average for the series, just as funny and somewhat more interestingly plotted than its immediate predecessor, the same year's *Dover and the Claret Tappers* (Foul Play/Countryman, 1989).

*** Robert J. Begiebing: *The Strange Death of Mistress Coffin*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, \$17.95. In New England of the 1640s, young Englishman Richard Browne is asked by a local magistrate to investigate the brutal murder of a young woman. The author, a literary historian who based his story on a real New Hampshire case, brings the time and its people to vivid life. The period prose style is especially well

done.

*** Rob Kantner: *The Thousand Yard Stare*, Bantam, \$4.50. The high school reunion has provided a good whodunit background for a number of writers, most recently the creator of Detroit private eye Ben Perkins, who is hired to track down former classmates while trying to determine whether a supposed teenage suicide of a quarter century ago was really murder. Kantner covers some familiar ground and doesn't always avoid the clichés of private eye writing, but solid storytelling, puzzle making, and character drawing will keep most readers in his grip.

*** Jacqueline Girdner: *The Last Resort*, Diamond, \$3.95. In her second case, Kate Jasper, owner of a gag-gift business and amateur sleuth, goes to a Southern California spa to help out her sad-sack ex-husband Craig, suspected of murdering his lawyer girlfriend. This is a very good example of the pure whodunit à la TV's *Murder, She Wrote*: it embraces the artificial conventions without apology and presents a colorful group of suspects, neither deep nor original but well-differentiated enough not to need a cast of guest stars to give them life. The likable and humorous Kate is well rid of Craig; current boyfriend Wayne I haven't decided about yet.

** Joan Hess: *Mortal Remains in Maggody*, Dutton, \$17.95. The little Ozark town of Maggody, Arkansas, has in common with St. Mary Mead, England, a crime rate far beyond the normal expectations of its population. In her latest

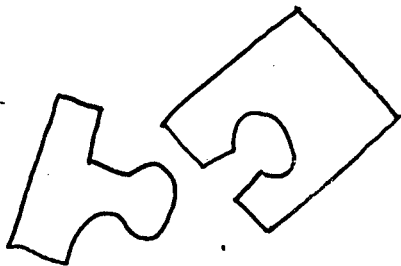
case, Police Chief Arly Hanks is looking for a serial firebug when the visit of a soft-porn movie company adds murder to her problems. Hess is one of the leading humorists in the genre, and the best one-liners and farcical situations here won't disappoint her fans. But the book, like so many in the current market, would be twice as good at about two-thirds the length. This kind of humor is virtually impossible to sustain at near-300 pages without losing its edge.

Among the bargains to be found on the remainder tables in your local bookstore are some original short-story anthologies produced specifically for that market. I don't know what price the 500-page *Great Tales of Crime and Detection* (Galahad) will sell for, but it will be far less than the \$20 or so you'd expect to pay if it came from a regular commercial publisher rather than an "instant remainder" specialist. Editor Charles Ardai has gathered 25 tales from the pages of *AHMM* and *EQMM*. While some may seem over-familiar—e.g. Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Kemelman's "The Nine-Mile Walk," and Paretzky's "The Case of the Pietro Andromache" (which though copyrighted 1988 is threatening to become as much an anthology staple as Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13"!)—others are relatively fresher. Michael Innes's "Tragedy of a Handkerchief," a fine Appleby tale involving a production of *Othello*, hasn't been anthologized excessively; John Jakes's "Uncle Foils Show Foe" is from his funny series written in *Variety*-ese, sur-

prisingly little known despite the rush to reprint this bestseller's early stories; and Robert Bloch's "Crime in Rhyme" (the editor points out) appears in its original 1957 magazine version, not the revised one included in Bloch's recent collected stories. That some of the longer entries—Graham Greene's "The Third Man" and Mark Twain's "A Double-Barrelled Detective Story"—have been published as separate books gives some idea how generous a collection this is. Most of the contribu-

tors are famous, but two of the most interesting tales come from lesser-known writers. Editor Ar-dai's "The Investigation of Things," newest of the entries with a 1991 copyright date, is a deftly written and constructed pure detective story set in eleventh-century China, while John H. Dirckx's 1983 Sherlock Holmes pastiche "The Adventure of the Oval Window" reconfirms his stature as one of the best contemporary imitators of Victorian and Edwardian detective fiction.

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a classic reprint by

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

The following story came to our attention thanks to Ross MacDonald's insightful introduction to Great Stories of Suspense which was published separately in his collection of essays, Self-Portrait: Ceaselessly into the Past (Capra Press, 1981). In the course of the introduction, MacDonald describes "The Comforts of Home" and John Cheever's "The Five-Forty-Eight" as "tragic-comic stories of guilt and punishment which have the intensity of dramatic poetry, combined with the bite of reality. Each in its way is concerned with the destruction of a man through his attempt to destroy a woman . . ."

THE COMFORTS OF HOME

by **FLANNERY O'CONNOR**

Thomas withdrew to the side of the window and with his head between the wall and the curtain he looked down on the driveway where the car had stopped. His mother and the little slut were getting out of it. His mother emerged slowly, stolid and awkward, and then the little slut's long slightly bowed legs slid out, the dress pulled above the knees. With a shriek of laughter she ran to meet the dog, who bounded, overjoyed, shaking with pleasure, to welcome her. Rage gathered throughout Thomas's large frame with a silent ominous intensity, like a mob assembling.

It was now up to him to pack a suitcase, go to the hotel, and stay there until the house should be cleared.

He did not know where a suitcase was, he disliked to pack, he needed his books, his typewriter was not portable, he was used to

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an electric blanket, he could not bear to eat in restaurants. His mother, with her daredevil charity, was about to wreck the peace of the house.

The back door slammed and the girl's laugh shot up from the kitchen, through the back hall, up the stairwell and into his room, making for him like a bolt of electricity. He jumped to the side and stood glaring about him. His words of the morning had been unequivocal: "If you bring that girl back into this house, I leave. You can choose—her or me."

She had made her choice. An intense pain gripped his throat. It was the first time in his thirty-five years. He felt a sudden burning moisture behind his eyes. Then he steadied himself, overcome by rage. On the contrary: she had not made any choice. She was counting on his attachment to his electric blanket. She would have to be shown.

The girl's laughter rang upward a second time and Thomas winced. He saw again her look of the night before. She had invaded his room. He had waked to find his door open and her in it. There was enough light from the hall to make her visible as she turned toward him. The face was like a comedienne's in a musical comedy—a pointed chin, wide apple cheeks, and feline empty eyes. He had sprung out of his bed and snatched a straight chair and then he had backed her out the door, holding the chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous cat. He had driven her silently down the hall, pausing when he reached it to beat on his mother's door. The girl, with a gasp, turned and fled into the guest room.

In a moment his mother had opened her door and peered out apprehensively. Her face, greasy with whatever she put on it at night, was framed in pink rubber curlers. She looked down the hall where the girl had disappeared. Thomas stood before her, the chair still lifted in front of him as if he were about to quell another beast. "She tried to get in my room," he hissed, pushing in. "I woke up and she was trying to get in my room." He closed the door behind him and his voice rose in outrage. "I won't put up with this! I won't put up with it another day!"

His mother, backed by him to her bed, sat down on the edge of it. She had a heavy body on which sat a thin, mysteriously gaunt and incongruous head.

"I'm telling you for the last time," Thomas said, "I won't put up with this another day." There was an observable tendency in all of

her actions. This was, with the best intentions in the world, to make a mockery of virtue, to pursue it with such a mindless intensity that everyone involved was made a fool of and virtue itself became ridiculous. "Not another day," he repeated.

His mother shook her head emphatically, her eyes still on the door.

Thomas put the chair on the floor in front of her and sat down on it. He leaned forward as if he were about to explain something to a defective child.

"That's just another way she's unfortunate," his mother said. "So awful, so awful. She told me the name of it but I forget what it is but it's something she can't help. Something she was born with. Thomas," she said and put her hand to her jaw, "suppose it were you?"

Exasperation blocked his windpipe. "Can't I make you see," he croaked, "that if she can't help herself you can't help her?"

His mother's eyes, intimate but untouchable, were the blue of great distances after sunset. "Nimpermaniac," she murmured.

"Nymphomaniac," he said fiercely. "She doesn't need to supply you with any fancy names. She's a moral moron. That's all you need to know. Born without the moral faculty—like somebody else would be born without a kidney or a leg. Do you understand?"

"I keep thinking it might be you," she said, her hand still on her jaw. "If it were you, how do you think I'd feel if nobody took you in? What if you were a nimpermaniac and not a brilliant smart person and you did what you couldn't help and—"

Thomas felt a deep unbearable loathing for himself as if he were turning slowly into the girl.

"What did she have on?" she asked abruptly, her eyes narrowing.

"Nothing!" he roared. "Now will you get her out of here!"

"How can I turn her out in the cold?" she said. "This morning she was threatening to kill herself again."

"Send her back to jail," Thomas said.

"I would not send you back to jail, Thomas," she said.

He got up and snatched the chair and fled the room while he was still able to control himself.

Thomas loved his mother. He loved her because it was his nature to do so, but there were times when he could not endure her love for him. There were times when it became nothing but pure idiot mystery and he sensed about him forces, invisible currents entirely out of his control. She proceeded always from the tritest of considera-

tions—it was the *nice thing to do*—into the most foolhardy engagements with the devil, whom, of course, she never recognized.

The devil for Thomas was only a manner of speaking, but it was a manner appropriate to the situations his mother got into. Had she been in any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil, that if Antony of Egypt had stayed at home and attended to his sister, no devils would have plagued him.

Thomas was not cynical and so far from being opposed to virtue, he saw it as the principle of order and the only thing that makes life bearable. His own life was made bearable by the fruits of his mother's saner virtues—by the well regulated house she kept and the excellent meals she served. But when virtue got out of hand with her, as now, a sense of devils grew upon him, and there were not mental quirks in himself or the old lady, they were denizens with personalities, present though not visible, who might any moment be expected to shriek or rattle a pot.

The girl had landed in the county jail a month ago on a bad-check charge and his mother had seen her picture in the paper. At the breakfast table she had gazed at it for a long time and then had passed it over the coffee pot to him. "Imagine," she said, "only nineteen years old and in that filthy jail. And she doesn't look like a bad girl."

Thomas glanced at the picture. It showed the face of a shrewd ragamuffin. He observed that the average age for criminality was steadily lowering.

"She looks like a wholesome girl," his mother said.

"Wholesome people don't pass bad checks," Thomas said.

"You don't know what you'd do in a pinch."

"I wouldn't pass a bad check," Thomas said.

"I think," his mother said, "I'll take her a little box of candy."

If then and there he had put his foot down, nothing else would have happened. His father, had he been living, would have put his foot down at that point. Taking a box of candy was her favorite nice thing to do. When anyone within her social station moved to town, she called and took a box of candy; when any of her friends' children had babies or won a scholarship, she called and took a box of candy; when an old person broke his hip, she was at his bedside with a box of candy. He had been amused at the idea of her taking a box of candy to the jail.

He stood now in his room with the girl's laugh rocketing away in his head and cursed his amusement.

When his mother returned from the visit to the jail, she had burst into his study without knocking and had collapsed full-length on his couch, lifting her small swollen feet up on the arm of it. After a moment, she recovered herself enough to sit up and put a newspaper under them. Then she fell back again. "We don't know how the other half lives," she said.

Thomas knew that though her conversation moved from cliché to cliché there were real experiences behind them. He was less sorry for the girl's being in jail than for his mother having to see her there. He would have spared her all unpleasant sights. "Well," he said and put away his journal, "you had better forget it now. The girl has ample reason to be in jail."

"You can't imagine what all she's been through," she said, sitting up again, "listen." The poor girl, Star, had been brought up by a stepmother with three children of her own, one an almost grown boy who had taken advantage of her in such dreadful ways that she had been forced to run away and find her real mother. Once found, her real mother had sent her to various boarding schools to get rid of her. At each of these, she had been forced to run away by the presence of perverts and sadists so monstrous that their acts defied description.

Thomas could tell that his mother had not been spared the details that she was sparing him. Now and again when she spoke vaguely, her voice shook and he could tell that she was remembering some horror that had been put to her graphically. He had hoped that in a few days the memory of all this would wear off, but it did not. The next day she returned to the jail with Kleenex and cold-cream and a few days later, she announced that she had consulted a lawyer.

It was at these times that Thomas truly mourned the death of his father, though he had not been able to endure him in life. The old man would have had none of this foolishness. Untouched by useless compassion, he would (behind her back) have pulled the necessary strings with his crony, the sheriff, and the girl would have been packed off to the state penitentiary to serve her time. He had always been engaged in some enraged action until one morning when (with an angry glance at his wife as if she alone were responsible) he had dropped dead at the breakfast table. Thomas had inherited his father's reason without his ruthlessness and his mother's love of

good without her tendency to pursue it. His plan for all practical action was to wait and see what developed.

The lawyer found that the story of the repeated atrocities was for the most part untrue, but when he explained to her that the girl was a psychopathic personality, not insane enough for the asylum, not criminal enough for the jail, not stable enough for society, Thomas's mother was more deeply affected than ever. The girl readily admitted that her story was untrue on account of her being a congenital liar; she lied, she said, because she was insecure. She had passed through the hands of several psychiatrists who had put the finishing touches to her education. She knew there was no hope for her. In the presence of such an affliction as this, his mother seemed bowed down by some painful mystery that nothing would make endurable but a redoubling of effort. To his annoyance, she appeared to look on *him* with compassion, as if her hazy charity no longer made distinctions.

A few days later she burst in and said that the lawyer had got the girl paroled—to her.

Thomas rose from his Morris chair, dropping the review he had been reading. His large bland face contracted in anticipated pain. "You are not," he said, "going to bring that girl here!"

"No, no," she said, "calm yourself, Thomas." She had managed with difficulty to get the girl a job in a pet shop in town and a place to board with a crotchety old lady of her acquaintance. People were not kind. They did not put themselves in the place of someone like Star who had everything against her.

Thomas sat down again and retrieved his review. He seemed just to have escaped some danger which he did not care to make clear to himself. "Nobody can tell you anything," he said, "but in a few days that girl will have left town, having got what she could out of you. You'll never hear from her again."

Two nights later he came home and opened the parlor door and was speared by a shrill depthless laugh. His mother and the girl sat close to the fireplace where the gas logs were lit. The girl gave the immediate impression of being physically crooked. Her hair was cut like a dog's or an elf's and she was dressed in the latest fashion. She was training on him a long familiar sparkling stare that turned after a second into an intimate grin.

"Thomas!" his mother said, her voice firm with the injunction not to bolt. "This is Star you've heard so much about. Star is going to have supper with us."

The girl called herself Star Drake. The lawyer had found that her real name was Sarah Ham.

Thomas neither moved nor spoke but hung in the door in what seemed a savage perplexity. Finally he said, "How do you do, Sarah," in a tone of such loathing that he was shocked at the sound of it. He reddened, feeling it beneath him to show contempt for any creature so pathetic. He advanced into the room, determined at least on a decent politeness and sat down heavily in a straight chair.

"Thomas writes history," his mother said with a threatening look at him. "He's president of the local Historical Society this year."

The girl leaned forward and gave Thomas an even more pointed attention. "Fabulous!" she said in a throaty voice.

"Right now Thomas is writing about the first settlers in this county," his mother said.

"Fabulous!" the girl repeated.

Thomas by an effort of will managed to look as if he were alone in the room.

"Say, you know who he looks like?" Star asked, her head on one side, taking him in at an angle.

"Oh, someone very distinguished!" his mother said archly.

"This cop I saw in the movie I went to last night," Star said.

"Star," his mother said, "I think you ought to be careful about the kind of movies you go to. I think you ought to see only the best ones. I don't think crime stories would be good for you."

"Oh this was a crime-does-not-pay," Star said, "and I swear this cop looked exactly like him. They were always putting something over on the guy. He would look like he couldn't stand it a minute longer or he would blow up. He was a riot. And not bad-looking," she added with an appreciative leer at Thomas.

"Star," his mother said, "I think it would be grand if you developed a taste for music."

Thomas sighed. His mother rattled on and the girl, paying no attention to her, let her eyes play over him. The quality of her look was such that it might have been her hands, resting now on his knees, now on his neck. Her eyes had a mocking glitter and he knew that she was well aware he could not stand the sight of her. He needed nothing to tell him he was in the presence of the very stuff of corruption, but blameless corruption because there was no responsible faculty behind it. He was looking at the most unendurable form of innocence. Absently he asked himself what the attitude of God was to this, meaning if possible to adopt it.

His mother's behavior throughout the meal was so idiotic that he could barely stand to look at her, and since he could less stand to look at Sarah Hamm he fixed on the sideboard across the room a continuous gaze of disapproval and disgust. Every remark of the girl's his mother met as if it deserved serious attention. She advanced several plans for the wholesome use of Star's spare time.

Sarah Ham paid no more attention to this advice than if it came from a parrot. Once when Thomas inadvertently looked in her direction, she winked. As soon as he had swallowed the last spoonful of dessert, he rose and muttered, "I have to go, I have a meeting."

"Thomas," his mother said, "I want you to take Star home on your way. I don't want her riding in taxis by herself at night."

For a moment Thomas remained furiously silent. Then he turned and left the room. Presently he came back with a look of obscure determination on his face. The girl was ready, meekly waiting at the parlor door. She cast up at him a great look of admiration and confidence. Thomas did not offer his arm but she took it anyway and moved out of the house and down the steps, attached to what might have been a miraculously moving monument.

"Be good!" his mother called.

Sarah Ham snickered and poked him in the ribs.

While getting his coat he had decided that this would be his opportunity to tell the girl that unless she ceased to be a parasite on his mother, he would see to it, personally, that she was returned to jail. He would let her know that he understood what she was up to, that he was not an innocent, and that there were certain things he would not put up with. At his desk, pen in hand, none was more articulate than Thomas. As soon as he found himself shut into the car with Sarah Ham, terror seized his tongue.

She curled her feet up under her and said, "Alone at last," and giggled.

Thomas swerved the car away from the house and drove fast toward the gate. Once on the highway, he shot forward as if he were being pursued.

"Jesus!" Sarah Ham said, swinging her feet off the seat. "Where's the fire?"

Thomas did not answer. In a few seconds he could feel her edging closer. She stretched, eased nearer, and finally hung her hand limply over his shoulder. "Tomsee doesn't like me," she said, "but I think he's fabulously cute."

Thomas covered the three and a half miles into town in a little over four minutes. The light at the first intersection was red but he ignored it. The old woman lived three blocks beyond. When the car screeched to a halt at the place, he jumped out and ran around to the girl's door and opened it.

She did not move from the car and Thomas was obliged to wait. After a moment one leg emerged, then her small white crooked face appeared and stared up at him. There was something about the look of it that suggested blindness but it was the blindness of those who don't know that they cannot see. Thomas was curiously sickened. The empty eyes moved over him. "Nobody likes me," she said in a sullen tone. "What if you were me and I couldn't stand to ride *you* three miles?"

"My mother likes you," he muttered.

"Her!" the girl said. "She's just about seventy-five years behind the times!"

Breathlessly Thomas said, "If I find you bothering her again, I'll have you put back in jail." There was a dull force behind his voice though it came out barely above a whisper.

"You and who else?" she said and drew back in the car as if now she did not intend to get out at all. Thomas reached into it, blindly grasped the front of her coat, pulled her out of it, and released her. Then he lunged back to the car and sped off. The other door was still hanging open and her laugh, bodiless but real, bounded up the street as if it were about to jump in the open side of the car and ride away with him. He reached over and slammed the door and then drove toward home, too angry to attend his meeting. He intended to make his mother well aware of his displeasure. He intended to leave no doubt in her mind. The voice of his father rasped in his head.

Numbskull, the old man said, put your foot down now. Show her who's boss before she shows you.

But when Thomas reached home, his mother, wisely, had gone to bed.

The next morning he appeared at the breakfast table, his brow lowered and the thrust of his jaw indicating that he was in a dangerous humor. When he intended to be determined, Thomas began like a bull that, before charging, backs with his head lowered and paws the ground. "All right now, listen," he began, yanking out his chair and sitting down, "I have something to say to you about that girl

and I don't intend to say it but once." He drew breath. "She's nothing but a little slut. She makes fun of you behind your back. She means to get everything she can out of you and you are nothing to her."

His mother looked as if she, too, had spent a restless night. She did not dress in the morning but wore her bathrobe and a grey turban around her head, which gave her face a disconcerting omniscient look. He might have been breakfasting with a sibyl.

"You'll have to use canned cream this morning," she said, pouring his coffee. "I forgot the other."

"All right, did you hear me?" Thomas growled.

"I'm not deaf," his mother said and put the pot back on the trivet. "I know I'm nothing but an old bag of wind to her."

"Then why do you persist in this foolhardy—"

"Thomas," she said, and put her hand to the side of her face, "it might be—"

"It is not me!" Thomas said, grasping the table leg at his knee.

She continued to hold her face, shaking her head slightly. "Think of all you have," she began. "All the comforts of home. And morals, Thomas. No bad inclinations, nothing bad you were born with."

Thomas began to breathe like someone who feels the onset of asthma. "You are not logical," he said in a limp voice. "*He* would have put his foot down."

The old lady stiffened. "You," she said, "are not like him."

Thomas opened his mouth silently.

"However," his mother said, in a tone of such subtle accusation that she might have been taking back the compliment, "I won't invite her back again since you're so dead set against her."

"I am not set against her," Thomas said. "I am set against your making a fool of yourself."

As soon as he left the table and closed the door of his study on himself, his father took up a squatting position in his mind. The old man had had the countryman's ability to converse squatting, though he was no countryman but had been born and brought up in the city and only moved to a smaller place later to exploit his talents. With steady skill, he had made them think him one of them. In the midst of a conversation on the courthouse lawn, he would squat and his two or three companions would squat with him with no break in the surface of the talk. By gesture he had lived his lie; he had never deigned to tell one.

Let her run over you, he said. You ain't like me. Not enough to be a man.

Thomas began vigorously to read and presently the image faded. The girl had caused a disturbance in the depths of his being, somewhere out of the reach of his power of analysis. He felt as if he had seen a tornado pass a hundred yards away and had an intimation that it would turn again and head directly for him. He did not get his mind firmly on his work until mid-morning.

Two nights later, his mother and he were sitting in the den after their supper, each reading a section of the evening paper, when the telephone began to ring with the brassy intensity of a fire alarm. Thomas reached for it. As soon as the receiver was in his hand, a shrill female voice screamed into the room, "Come get this girl! Come get her! Drunk! Drunk in my parlor and I won't have it! Lost her job and come back here drunk! I won't have it!"

His mother leapt up and snatched the receiver.

The ghost of Thomas's father rose before him. Call the sheriff, the old man prompted. "Call the sheriff," Thomas said in a loud voice. "Call the sheriff to go there and pick her up."

"We'll be right there," his mother was saying. "We'll come and get her right away. Tell her to get her things together."

"She ain't in no condition to get nothing together!" the voice screamed. "You shouldn't have put something like her off on me! My house is respectable!"

"Tell her to call the sheriff," Thomas shouted.

His mother put the receiver down and looked at him. "I wouldn't turn a dog over to that man," she said.

Thomas sat in the chair with his arms folded and looked fixedly at the wall.

"Think of the poor girl, Thomas," his mother said, "with nothing. Nothing. And we have everything."

When they arrived, Sarah Ham was slumped spraddle-legged against the banister on the boarding-house front steps. Her tam was down on her forehead where the old woman had slammed it and her clothes were bulging out of her suitcase where the old woman had thrown them in. She was carrying on a drunken conversation with herself in a low personal tone. A streak of lipstick ran up one side of her face. She allowed herself to be guided by his mother to the car and put in the back seat without seeming to know who the rescuer was. "Nothing to talk to all day but a pack of goddamned parakeets," she said in a furious whisper.

Thomas, who had not got out of the car at all, or looked at her after the first revolted glance, said, "I'm telling you once and for all, the place to take her is the jail."

His mother, sitting on the back seat, holding the girl's hand, did not answer.

"All right, take her to the hotel," he said.

"I cannot take a drunk girl to a hotel, Thomas," she said. "You know that."

"Then take her to a hospital."

"She doesn't need a jail or a hotel or a hospital," his mother said, "she needs a home."

"She doesn't need mine," Thomas said.

"Only for tonight, Thomas," the old lady sighed. "Only for tonight."

Since then eight days had passed. The little slut was established in the guest room. Every day his mother set out to find her a job and a place to board, and failed, for the old woman had broadcast a warning. Thomas kept to his room or the den. His home was to him home, workshop, church, as personal as the shell of a turtle and as necessary. He could not believe that it could be violated in this way. His flushed face had a constant look of stunned outrage.

As soon as the girl was up in the morning, her voice throbbed out in a blues song that would rise and waver, then plunge low with insinuations of passion about to be satisfied, and Thomas, at his desk, would lunge up and begin frantically stuffing his ears with Kleenex. Each time he started from one room to another, one floor to another, she would be certain to appear. Each time he was half-way up or down the stairs, she would either meet him and pass, cringing coyly, or go up or down behind him, breathing small, tragic, spearmint-flavored sighs. She appeared to adore Thomas's repugnance to her and to draw it out of him every chance she got as if it added delectably to her martyrdom.

The old man—small, wasp-like, in his yellowed panama hat, his seersucker suit, his pink, carefully soiled shirt, his small string tie—appeared to have taken up his station in Thomas's mind and from there, usually squatting, he shot out the same rasping suggestion every time the boy paused from his forced studies. Put your foot down. Go to see the sheriff.

The sheriff was another edition of Thomas's father except that he wore a checkered shirt and a Texas-type hat and was ten years

younger. He was as easily dishonest, and he had genuinely admired the old man. Thomas, like his mother, would have gone far out of his way to avoid his glassy pale-blue gaze. He kept hoping for another solution, for a miracle.

With Sarah Ham in the house, meals were unbearable.

"Tomsee doesn't like me," she said the third or fourth night at the supper table and cast her pouting gaze across at the large rigid figure of Thomas, whose face was set with the look of a man trapped by insufferable odors. "He doesn't want me here. Nobody wants me anywhere."

"Thomas's name is Thomas," his mother interrupted. "Not Tomsee."

"I made Tomsee up," she said. "I think it's cute. He hates me."

"Thomas does not hate you," his mother said. "We are not the kind of people who hate," she added, as if this were an imperfection that had been bred out of them generations ago.

"Oh, I know when I'm not wanted," Sarah Ham continued. "They didn't even want me in jail. If I killed myself I wonder would God want me?"

"Try it and see," Thomas muttered.

The girl screamed with laughter. Then she stopped abruptly, her face puckered, and she began to shake. "The best thing to do," she said, her teeth clattering, "is to kill myself. Then I'll be out of everybody's way. I'll go to hell and be out of God's way. And even the devil won't want me. He'll kick me out of hell, not even in hell—" she wailed.

Thomas rose, picked up his plate and knife and fork, and carried them to the den to finish his supper. After that, he had not eaten another meal at the table but had had his mother serve him at his desk. At these meals, the old man was intensely present to him. He appeared to be tipping backwards in his chair, his thumbs beneath his galluses, while he said such things as, She never ran me away from my own table.

A few nights later, Sarah Ham slashed her wrists with a paring knife and had hysterics. From the den where he was closeted after supper, Thomas heard a shriek, then a series of screams, then his mother's scurrying footsteps through the house. He did not move. His first instant of hope that the girl had cut her throat faded as he realized she could not have done it and continue to scream the way she was doing. He returned to his journal and presently the screams

subsided. In a moment his mother burst in with his coat and hat. "We have to take her to the hospital," she said. "She tried to do away with herself. I have a tourniquet on her arm. Oh, Lord, Thomas," she said, "imagine being so low you'd do a thing like that!"

Thomas rose woodenly and put on his hat and coat. "We will take her to the hospital," he said, "and we will leave her there."

"And drive her to despair again?" the old lady cried. "Thomas!"

Standing in the center of his room now, realizing that he had reached the point where action was inevitable, that he must pack, that he must leave, that he must go, Thomas remained immovable.

His fury was directed not at the little slut but at his mother. Even though the doctor had found that she had barely damaged herself and had raised the girl's wrath by laughing at the tourniquet and putting only a streak of iodine on the cut, his mother could not get over the incident. Some new weight of sorrow seemed to have been thrown across her shoulders, and not only Thomas, but Sarah Ham was infuriated by this, for it appeared to be a general sorrow that would have found another object no matter what good fortune came to either of them. The experience of Sarah Ham had plunged the old lady into mourning for the world.

The morning after the attempted suicide, she had gone through the house and collected all the knives and scissors and locked them in a drawer. She emptied a bottle of rat poison down the toilet and took up the roach tablets from the kitchen floor. Then she came to Thomas's study and said in a whisper, "Where is that gun of his? I want you to lock it up."

"The gun is in my drawer," Thomas roared, "and I will not lock it up. If she shoots herself, so much the better!"

"Thomas," his mother said, "she'll hear you!"

"Let her hear me!" Thomas yelled. "Don't you know she has no intention of killing herself? Don't you know her kind never kill themselves? Don't you—"

His mother slipped out the door and closed it to silence him and Sarah Ham's laugh, quite close in the hall, came rattling into his room. "Tomsee'll find out. I'll kill myself and then he'll be sorry he wasn't nice to me. I'll use his own lil gun, his own lil ol' pearl-handled revol-lervuh!" she shouted and let out a loud tormented-sounding laugh in imitation of a movie monster.

Thomas ground his teeth. He pulled out his drawer and felt for the pistol. It was an inheritance from the old man, whose opinion it had been that every house should contain a loaded gun. He had

discharged two bullets one night into the side of a prowler, but Thomas had never shot anything. He had no fear that the girl would use the gun on herself and he closed the drawer. Her kind clung tenaciously to life and were able to wrest some histrionic advantage from every moment.

Several ideas for getting rid of her had entered his head but each of these had been suggestions whose moral tone indicated that they had come from a mind akin to his father's, and Thomas had rejected them. He could not get the girl locked up again until she did something illegal. The old man would have been able with no qualms at all to get her drunk and send her out on the highway in his car, meanwhile notifying the highway patrol of her presence on the road, but Thomas considered this below his moral stature. Suggestions continued to come to him, each more outrageous than the last.

He had not the vaguest hope that the girl would get the gun and shoot herself, but that afternoon when he looked in the drawer the gun was gone. His study locked from the inside, not the out. He cared nothing about the gun, but the thought of Sarah Ham's hands sliding among his paper infuriated him. Now even his study was contaminated. The only place left untouched by her was his bedroom.

That night she entered it.

In the morning at breakfast, he did not eat and did not sit down. He stood beside his chair and delivered his ultimatum while his mother sipped her coffee as if she were both alone in the room and in great pain. "I have stood this," he said, "for as long as I am able. Since I see plainly that you care nothing about me, about my peace or comfort or working conditions, I am about to take the only step open to me. I will give you one more day. If you bring the girl back into this house this afternoon, I leave. You can choose—her or me." He had more to say but at that point his voice cracked and he left the room.

At ten o'clock his mother and Sarah Ham left the house.

At four he heard the car wheels on the gravel and rushed to the window. As the car stopped, the dog stood up, alert, shaking.

Thomas seemed unable to take the first step that would set him walking to the closet in the hall to look for the suitcase. He was like a man handed a knife and told to operate on himself if he wished to live. His huge hands clenched helplessly. His expression was a turmoil of indecision and outrage. His pale-blue eyes seemed to sweat

in his broiling face. He closed them for a moment and on the back of his lids, his father's image leered at him. Idiot! the old man hissed, idiot! The criminal slut stole your gun! See the sheriff! See the sheriff!

It was a moment before Thomas opened his eyes. He seemed newly stunned. He stood where he was for at least three minutes, then he turned slowly like a large vessel reversing its direction and faced the door. He stood there a moment longer, then he left, his face set to see the ordeal through.

He did not know where he would find the sheriff. The man made his own rules and kept his own hours. Thomas stopped first at the jail where his office was, but he was not in it. He went to the courthouse and was told by a clerk that the sheriff had gone to the barber shop across the street. "Yonder's the deppity," the clerk said and pointed out the window to the large figure of a man in a checkered shirt, who was leaning against the side of a police car, looking into space.

"It has to be the sheriff," Thomas said and left for the barber shop. As little as he wanted anything to do with the sheriff, he realized that the man was at least intelligent and not simply a mound of sweating flesh.

The barber said the sheriff had just left. Thomas started back to the courthouse and as he stepped onto the sidewalk from the street, he saw a lean, slightly stooped figure gesticulating angrily at the deputy.

Thomas approached with an aggressiveness brought on by nervous agitation. He stopped abruptly three feet away and said in an over-loud voice, "Can I have a word with you?" without adding the sheriff's name, which was Farebrother.

Farebrother turned his sharp creased face just enough to take Thomas in, and the deputy did likewise, but neither spoke. The sheriff removed a very small piece of cigarette from his lip and dropped it at his feet. "I told you what to do," he said to the deputy. Then he moved off with a slight nod that indicated Thomas could follow him if he wanted to see him. The deputy slunk around the front of the police car and got inside.

Farebrother, with Thomas following, headed across the courthouse square and stopped beneath a tree that shaded a quarter of the front lawn. He waited, leaning slightly forward, and lit another cigarette.

Thomas began to blurt out his business. As he had not had time to prepare his words, he was barely coherent. By repeating the same thing over several times, he managed at length to get out what he wanted to say. When he finished, the sheriff was still leaning slightly forward, at an angle to him, his eyes on nothing in particular. He remained that way without speaking.

Thomas began again, slower and in a lamer voice, and Farebrother let him continue for some time before he said, "We had her once." He then allowed himself a slow, creased, all-knowing quarter smile.

"I had nothing to do with that," Thomas said. "That was my mother."

Farebrother squatted.

"She was trying to help the girl," Thomas said. "She didn't know she couldn't be helped."

"Bit off more than she could chew, I reckon," the voice below him mused.

"She has nothing to do with this," Thomas said. "She doesn't know I'm here. The girl is dangerous with that gun."

"He," the sheriff said, "never let anything grow under his feet. Particularly nothing a woman planted."

"She might kill somebody with that gun," Thomas said weakly, looking down at the round top of the Texas-type hat.

There was a long time of silence.

"Where's she got it?" Farebrother asked.

"I don't know. She sleeps in the guest room. It must be in there, in her suitcase probably," Thomas said.

Farebrother lapsed into silence again.

"You could come search the guest room," Thomas said in a strained voice. "I can go home and leave the latch off the front door and you can come in quietly and go upstairs and search her room."

Farebrother turned his head so that his eyes looked boldly at Thomas's knees. "You seem to know how it ought to be done," he said. "Want to swap jobs?"

Thomas said nothing because he couldn't think of anything to say, but he waited doggedly. Farebrother removed the cigarette butt from his lips and dropped it on the grass. Beyond him on the courthouse porch a group of loiterers who had been leaning at the left of the door moved over to the right where a patch of sunlight had settled. From one of the upper windows a crumpled piece of paper blew out and drifted down.

"I'll come along about six," Farebrother said. "Leave the latch off the door and keep out of the way—yourself and them two women, too."

Thomas let out a rasping sound of relief meant to be "Thanks," and struck off across the grass like someone released. The phrase, "them two women," stuck like a burr in his brain—the subtlety of the insult to his mother hurting him more than any of Farebrother's references to his own incompetence. As he got into his car, his face suddenly flushed. Had he delivered his mother over to the sheriff—to be a butt for the man's tongue? Was he betraying her to get rid of the little slut? He saw at once that this was not the case. He was doing what he was doing for her own good, to rid her of a parasite that would ruin their peace.

He started his car and drove quickly home, but once he had turned in the driveway he decided it would be better to park some distance from the house and go quietly in by the back door. He parked on the grass and on the grass walked in a circle toward the rear of the house. The sky was lined with mustard-colored streaks. The dog was asleep on the back doormat. At the approach of his master's step, he opened one yellow eye, took him in, and closed it again.

Thomas let himself into the kitchen. It was empty and the house was quiet enough for him to be aware of the loud ticking of the kitchen clock. It was a quarter to six. He tiptoed hurriedly through the hall to the front door and took the latch off it. Then he stood for a moment listening. From behind the closed parlor door, he heard his mother snoring softly and presumed that she had gone to sleep while reading. On the other side of the hall, not three feet from his study, the little slut's black coat and red pocketbook were slung on a chair. He heard water running upstairs and decided she was taking a bath.

He went into his study and sat down at his desk to wait, noting with distaste that every few moments a tremor ran through him. He sat for a minute or two doing nothing. Then he picked up a pen and began to draw squares on the back of an envelope that lay before him. He looked at his watch. It was eleven minutes to six. After a moment he idly drew the center drawer of the desk out over his lap. For a moment he stared at the gun without recognition. Then he gave a yelp and leaped up. She had put it back!

Idiot! his father hissed, idiot! Go plant it in her pocketbook. Don't just stand there. Go plant it in her pocketbook!

Thomas stood staring at the drawer.

Moron! the old man fumed. Quick, while there's time! Go plant it in her pocketbook!

Thomas did not move.

Imbecile! his father cried.

Thomas picked up the gun.

Make haste! the old man ordered.

Thomas started forward, holding the gun away from him. He opened the door and looked at the chair. The black coat and red pocketbook were lying on it almost within reach.

Hurry up, you fool, his father said.

From behind the parlor door, the almost inaudible snores of his mother rose and fell. They seemed to mark an order of time that had nothing to do with the instants left to Thomas. There was no other sound.

Quick, you imbecile, before she wakes up, the old man said.

The snores stopped and Thomas heard the sofa springs groan. He grabbed the red pocketbook. It had a skinlike feel to his touch and as it opened he caught an unmistakable odor of the girl. Wincing, he thrust in the gun and then drew back. His face burned an ugly dull red.

"What is Tomsee putting in my purse?" she called and her pleased laugh bounced down the staircase. Thomas whirled.

She was at the top of the stair, coming down in the manner of a fashion model, one bare leg and then the other thrusting out the front of her kimona in a definite rhythm. "Tomsee is being naughty," she said in a throaty voice. She reached the bottom and cast a possessive leer at Thomas, whose face was now more grey than red. She reached out, pulled the bag open with her finger and peered at the gun.

His mother opened the parlor door and looked out.

"Tomsee put his pistol in my bag!" the girl shrieked.

"Ridiculous," his mother said, yawning. "What would Thomas want to put his pistol in your bag for?"

Thomas stood slightly hunched, his hands hanging helplessly at the wrists as if he had just pulled them out of a pool of blood.

"I don't know what for," the girl said, "but he sure did it," and she proceeded to walk around Thomas, her hands on her hips, her neck thrust forward and her intimate grin fixed on him fiercely. All at once her expression seemed to open as the purse had opened when Thomas touched it. She stood with her head cocked on one side in

an attitude of disbelief. "Oh boy," she said slowly, "is he a case."

At that instant, Thomas damned not only the girl but the entire order of the universe that made her possible.

"Thomas wouldn't put a gun in your bag," his mother said. "Thomas is a gentleman."

The girl made a chortling noise. "You can see it in there," she said and pointed to the open purse.

You *found* it in her bag, you dimwit! the old man hissed.

"I found it in her bag!" Thomas shouted. "The dirty criminal slut stole my gun!"

His mother gasped at the sound of the other presence in his voice. The old lady's sybil-like face turned pale.

"Found it, my eye!" Sarah Ham shrieked and started for the pocketbook, but Thomas, as if his arm were guided by his father, caught it first and snatched the gun. The girl in a frenzy lunged at Thomas's throat and would actually have caught him around the neck had not his mother thrown herself forward to protect her.

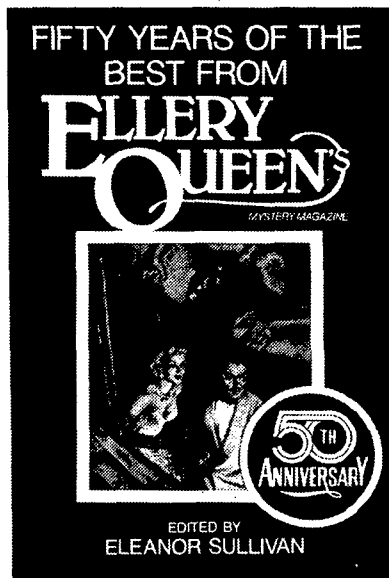
Fire! the old man yelled.

Thomas fired. The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts until all shrieks were stilled and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order.

The echo died away in waves. Before the last ones had faded, Farebrother opened the door and put his head inside the hall. His nose wrinkled. His expression for some few seconds was that of a man unwilling to admit surprise. His eyes were clear as glass, reflecting the scene. The old lady lay on the floor between the girl and Thomas.

The sheriff's brain worked instantly like a calculating machine. He saw the facts as if they were already in print: the fellow had intended all along to kill his mother and pin it on the girl. But Farebrother had been too quick for him. They were not yet aware of his head in the door. As he scrutinized the scene, further insights were flashed to him. Over her body, the killer and the slut were about to collapse into each other's arms. The sheriff knew a nasty bit when he saw it. He was accustomed to enter upon scenes that were not as bad as he had hoped to find them, but this one met his expectations.

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a **NEW** Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Anything unusual?" Leopold asked, already knowing there must be something.

"Yes. Doc Bueller dug the bullet out of Dwyer's chest and examined it under a microscope. You know the fire was supposed to have set off a box of cartridges in the bedroom."

"Yes."

"The slug they dug out of Randy Dwyer had lands and grooves on its sides. It had been fired from a gun barrel, probably from a .38 caliber automatic . . ."

PUZZLE IN A SMOKE-FILLED ROOM

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

There hadn't been a fire in two weeks, and Randy Dwyer's days on the job were beginning to blend into one another with a boring sameness that made him anxious for his shift to end. The men of Fire Company Five took turns doing the cooking for the group, but even that did little to break the monotony. Randy Dwyer was almost relieved on the days when they were sent out to check hydrants.

Usually in the evenings, after dinner, he'd play euchre with three of the men on his truck. Mike Rascow usually won, but it was fun anyhow, and helped break the monotony. It was Monday night, in the midst of their regular games, when the alarm finally sounded. Tony Loma went running to the tape to read the location. "House fire," he reported, "122 Baldwin—called in by a neighbor."

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"Let's go!" Rascow shouted, throwing down his cards. Jack Yount was already at the wheel of the pumper, throwing the switch that activated the overhead door and the flashing red lights outside the station. Dwyer and the others grabbed their coats and helmets from the rack as they ran. Their boots and other equipment were already on the truck. Within ninety seconds of getting the alarm, they were on their way.

"At last, a little action," Rascow said. He had a black moustache which he had to keep trimmed so it wouldn't interfere with his oxygen mask.

Usually they rode inside the engine in the compartment just behind the driver, but tonight, because the weather was warm and they were feeling good, they stood on the backstep, clinging to the rails like firefighters of an earlier decade.

The whine of the siren cut through the night as Jack Yount guided the engine down the main street for about a mile before turning right into Baldwin. They saw the flames immediately, shooting from the second floor of the house—a frame dwelling built in the 1930s.

Mike Rascow was off the engine before it came to a full stop, pulling a length of hose after him. He quickly unscrewed the nozzle cap from a fire hydrant two doors down from the burning house while Dwyer attached the other end to the hydrant intake on the side of the pumper. They had done this so often it was almost automatic by now. Tony Loma was setting up an extension ladder against the side of the house.

"Anyone still inside?" Randy asked a woman in pajamas and a robe who had come running out to meet them.

"My husband!" she cried. "He went up to bed early and he may have been smoking! You've got to save him!"

Another engine, from Company 8, had just pulled up. Rascow took the hose and Dwyer led the way into the house, carrying his axe. Yount was following Loma up the outside ladder. The smoke was thickening, but not yet deadly. Dwyer ran up the inside stairs to the second floor, hearing the breaking of glass as Loma smashed through one of the windows from outside and he and Yount started playing their hose into the burning bedroom.

Dwyer could see a man in his underwear huddled in one corner of the room, trying to escape the fire's fury. Rascow doused Dwyer with water from the second hose as he rushed into the room. The blaze seemed to be centered on the mattress, but it had already spread to a dresser and a closet. As Dwyer reached out a gloved

hand toward the cornered man, he heard the crack of an exploding cartridge. He had an instant to remember what they'd taught him at the fire academy about homeowners who kept a gun and extra ammo in their bedrooms.

Then there was the crack of a second shot and he felt something pierce his chest.

Firefighter Randy Dwyer was pronounced dead on arrival at the city's Brooke Medical Center, the victim of a bizarre but not unheard-of accident in which the intense heat of the fire had detonated the powder charge in several pistol cartridges stored in the homeowner's bedroom. Firefighters were taught to retreat from a location at once if they heard the sound of shots or explosions, but there'd been no time for Randy to escape. A tumbling lead slug had torn open his chest and penetrated his heart.

Captain Leopold attended the young firefighter's funeral as part of a small police-department delegation. After the prayers at the cemetery, he met the man's widow, a slim, handsome woman who wore her black dress more like a fashion model than a wife in mourning. "I'm very pleased you're here, Captain," she said with a trace of British accent. "And his chums from the fire department, of course. For as long as I knew him, Randy wanted to fight fires."

"If there's anything any of us can do, Mrs. Dwyer," Leopold said.

As they walked back to the car, Sergeant Connie Trent, who'd accompanied Leopold, remarked, "You could probably get a lunch date with her if you play your cards right."

"Not nice, Connie," Leopold said.

The three firefighters who'd worked with Dwyer were standing on the sidewalk with a plain young woman. They'd served as pallbearers and seemed ill at ease now that their formal role was ended. Leopold introduced himself. The one with a moustache replied, "I'm Mike Rascow. This is Tony Loma and Jack Yount. And my wife Clara."

"These freak accidents," Leopold said. "They're terrible for you all."

Driving back to Headquarters, Connie said, "I guess you never know when your number's going to come up."

"It's just as well we don't."

He hadn't been back in the office more than five minutes when Lieutenant Fletcher appeared in the doorway with a cup of coffee. "We got problems, Captain."

"Bring me a cup, too, and you can tell me about them."

Fletcher went back for a second coffee. When he returned, he settled into a visitor's chair. "You know that fireman Randy Dwyer who was killed Monday night?"

"I just came from his funeral. What about him?"

"Doc Bueller just sent up the autopsy report. There was no question about the cause of death so he didn't hurry it."

"Anything unusual?" Leopold asked, already knowing there must be something.

"Yes. Doc Bueller dug the bullet out of Dwyer's chest and examined it under a microscope. You know the fire was supposed to have set off a box of cartridges in the bedroom."

"Yes."

"The slug they dug out of Randy Dwyer had lands and grooves on its sides. It had been fired from a gun barrel, probably from a .38-caliber revolver."

There was a simple explanation, Leopold told himself as he drove out Baldwin Street to the burned house. The original police report had stated that the owner of the house, Aaron Pettigrew, had a license to possess the revolver and that he used it exclusively for target practice. Leopold knew a number of sports shooters and hunters had loading equipment, purchasing gunpowder, cartridge cases, and lead slugs in quantity and making their own bullets at home. He often wondered how much money this saved them, but perhaps Aaron Pettigrew was an especially saving sort. He might even dig his used slugs out of the targets to reuse them, which would explain the lands and grooves. They'd have been from the previous time the bullet was fired, not the time it killed Randy Dwyer.

That was Leopold's theory, at least. Aaron Pettigrew took less than a minute to demolish it. "No, I never do my own loading. It's too much trouble." He was a small, deeply tanned man in his forties who moved with the gracefulness of someone who took care of his body. "To tell you the truth, I don't do much target shooting, either. I just keep the gun for protection. These days you never know."

There was still a possibility that the heat from the fire had exploded the cartridge in the gun's chamber, propelling it out the barrel. "Could you show me where the weapon was stored during the fire, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"If you don't mind rummaging around in the ruin. Come on up with me."

The first floor of the house had suffered only some water damage, and the fire itself had been confined to the upstairs master bedroom. "You're still able to live here?" Leopold asked.

"We're staying across the street with neighbors till some of it gets fixed. I'm off from work today because I'm waiting for the insurance adjuster. Otherwise you wouldn't have caught me home."

"Where do you work?"

"At the Westside Health Club."

"The police report says the fire was caused by smoking in bed. How does that square with your health-club image?"

"I don't smoke on the job. I'm trying to give it up completely, but once in a while a cigarette relaxes me."

He led the way to the burned-out bedroom. The ruined mattress had been thrown out the window by the firemen, but the other furnishings were still intact, if a bit charred by the blaze. The walls and ceiling were scorched, too, and the draperies were all but burned away from the windows. "The gun and ammunition were in the top drawer of my dresser here. I'd taken the gun out to clean it and the box of cartridges was lying on the bed."

"You were in the room all the time?"

"Yes. The fire trapped me in the corner—I couldn't get out."

"Then you saw the fireman get shot?"

"Well, as much as you can see anything in a smoke-filled room. He was the first one through the door, just as the fire reached the box of cartridges on the bed. I heard one go off, but before I could shout a warning there was another and he fell."

"The cartridges all went off?"

He nodded. "There were only a dozen left in the box and they all went in about two minutes."

"Where was the gun during all this?"

"Well, it was in my hand. I grabbed it when the bed caught on fire."

"Could I see it?"

"I just put it back in the same place the next day," Pettigrew said, pulling open the charred dresser drawer. He handed over a .38-caliber snub-nosed revolver that still had traces of soot on it. Leopold opened the cylinder, but the weapon was unloaded.

"Were there bullets in it the night of the fire?"

"Of course not," he said, slightly indignant. "Only a fool tries to clean a loaded gun."

"Could I take this along for a test firing?"

Pettigrew hesitated. "Do I have a choice?"

"Certainly. Although I can get a court order easily enough."

"Take it. Just bring it back in one piece."

"Are there any cartridges?"

The small man shook his head. "They all got burned up. I haven't had a chance to replace them."

Leopold nodded. "Could I speak to your wife, too?"

"She works during the day, selling real estate. You can catch her in the evening."

"I'll do that."

He went downstairs and out to his car. Pettigrew didn't do his own loading and the gun had been empty when the fire started. That seemed to eliminate the only two possible ways in which Randy Dwyer could have been shot with a bullet that had rifling marks on it. Still, it would be better to wait for a ballistics report on the gun.

Fletcher had the report first thing the following morning. "The bullet *was* fired from Pettigrew's gun, Captain. Now what?"

"I suppose we have to question the other witnesses. Pettigrew's wife, the three other men from Engine Company 5—" He had another thought. "Was Dwyer conscious before he died? Did he say anything?"

"I don't know, Captain. We could check with the ambulance attendant and the hospital."

"Let me talk to them. Meanwhile, you track down the men he was working with. See when we can have them all in here for a session."

"Together?"

"The first time, yes. Then we might talk to them individually."

While Fletcher went to work on that, Leopold drove out to Brooke Medical Center and talked to the people on duty in the emergency room. One nurse was on duty Monday night, and she assured him Randy Dwyer had been dead on arrival—the house physician had pronounced him dead as soon as they slid him from the ambulance.

"Could I speak with the ambulance attendant?"

She consulted her records. "That would be Vince Scarlata at Star Ambulance Service."

He thanked her and went on his way. Driving out to the Star Ambulance garage, he wondered what he actually expected to learn. There had been a case earlier in his career in which the victim had been shot to death in the back of an ambulance, but he hardly expected a repeat of that. Randy Dwyer had been shot and killed in

Aaron Pettigrew's smoke-filled bedroom. All he had to establish was how it had happened.

Scarлата was due to start work at noon, so Leopold waited for him. The attendant was a well trained physician's assistant, he informed Leopold, and there was no mistake in his initial diagnosis. "Dwyer was dead when we arrived. I could see it right away, but we needed a doctor to make it official so we wheeled him over to Brooke Center."

"Did anyone else ride with him in the ambulance?"

Scarлата shook his head. "Just me. He never stirred or made a sound during the trip. He was dead, Captain."

Leopold went back to his car and found a message on the computer screen to call Fletcher. He got him on the radio and Fletcher told him the three firemen would be in Leopold's office before their evening shift began at four o'clock.

Leopold wanted Connie and Fletcher in on the meeting, too, and six people could never fit into his cramped office, so they ended up meeting around the big table in one of the interrogation rooms. The three firefighters arrived together and shook hands all around. Leopold decided that Mike Rascow was the most outgoing of the three. Tony Loma spoke little and studied his hands. Jack Yount, the driver, seemed like a nice guy who was puzzled at what they were doing there. "We've got to be on duty at four," he announced, speaking for the others.

"This shouldn't take long," Leopold assured them. "An odd situation has come up regarding Randy Dwyer's death. It concerns the bullet that killed him having been fired from a gun." Rascow and Yount exchanged surprised glances, while Loma continued studying his hands. "I'm sure there's some simple explanation for it, but we have to investigate, of course. We especially want to know if there's any possibility this man Pettigrew might have shot Dwyer as he burst into the room, simply out of fright or a reflex action."

"I doubt it," Yount said at once. "We were all there with him, more or less. Tony and I were coming through the window and Mike was behind him with the hose."

Mike Rascow agreed. "Pettigrew's gun was pointed at the floor. He never raised it. We all ducked for cover when those bullets started flying, but as soon as they stopped I grabbed the gun out of his hand. Randy was already on the floor then."

"Dead?"

Tony Loma raised his head. "He sure looked dead. He wasn't moving and I could see the wound in his chest. I dragged him by

the feet into the upstairs hall. After the fire was out, Mike worked over him while we waited for the ambulance."

Leopold turned to Jack Yount. "Was that the way you saw it, too?"

"Yeah, as much as I *could* see. The smoke was pretty thick."

"Did Randy get along with you guys?"

"Sure. Everybody liked him."

They talked until it was time for the men to leave, and after they'd gone Leopold sat frowning at his notes. "Nothing. We've got nothing, except that Pettigrew's gun killed him. At best we can show the gun must have been loaded, and fired accidentally, but that's no crime."

"So it was an accident." Fletcher shrugged. "Accidents happen."

Leopold shook his head and went back to his office. Maybe he was straining to manufacture a murder where none existed. He looked at the morgue photos again, studying the rifling marks on the fatal bullet. He glanced at pictures of the entrance wound, exit wound, and various bruises no doubt acquired on the job. None of them told him anything.

Finally he called Connie in. "I know this sounds far-fetched, but I want you to run a check on a young man named Vince Scarlata. He's an attendant with Star Ambulance Service and he was with Dwyer on the ride to the hospital. I had a case once—"

"I know, Captain." It had been before her time, but they'd talked about it. "I'll get right on it."

He went home that night and told his wife Molly about it. "What do you think, Molly?" he asked when he'd finished. "Is there anything to it or am I just chasing smoke?"

"I'll admit there's a lot of smoke—a whole room full of it."

"Any suggestions?"

"So far you've talked to Pettigrew and this Vince Scarlata and the three firemen. If you want a suggestion, go talk to the wives."

"What?"

"Talk to Pettigrew's wife. And talk to Randy Dwyer's wife."

Aaron Pettigrew's wife was named Jenny. Leopold remembered her husband saying that she sold real estate, and the following day he managed to track her down at the office where she worked. She was a small woman who moved and talked fast. "You came about the fire, I suppose," she greeted him, extending a hand that rattled with gold bracelets as he shook it.

"Yes, if I could just have a few minutes of your time."

She led him into a photo gallery where they were surrounded by black-and-white pictures of area homes for sale. "This is about as private as it gets here. You can tell me now. It's about Aaron, isn't it?"

Leopold was taken aback for an instant. "Well, he probably told you we've been running ballistics tests on his gun."

"Sometimes he gets crazy when he smokes."

It took another instant for her words to make sense to Leopold. "Of course—pot. He'd given up regular cigarettes, but he went up to the bedroom evenings to smoke pot."

"I thought you already knew. Well, then he'd get out that gun of his and load it up. That really scared me." She was pacing back and forth as she spoke.

"He said the gun was empty, that he was cleaning it."

"He cleaned it about once a year. He was smoking and imagining he was a cowboy or something. He was in another world. That's how the bed caught on fire."

"Do you think he could have shot at the first fireman through the door?"

"I don't know. He yelled down to me that the bed was on fire, so he wasn't completely zonked out."

"Did you call 911?"

"I was about to when I heard the sirens. I guess my neighbor saw the flames and called."

"So you believe the gun was loaded and your husband was high on pot when the mattress caught on fire."

"It's a pretty safe guess. That's what I live with."

"Has he ever threatened to harm you with the gun?"

"No, he goes off by himself. When he hasn't been smoking, he's a real quiet guy. With some people it's just like drinking too much, I guess."

Leopold left Jenny Pettigrew and drove across town to the small ranch home Randy Dwyer had shared with his wife Margaret. There was a yellow sportscar in the driveway and a familiar figure was just leaving the house. It was Jack Yount, the engine driver who'd worked with her husband. Yount seemed surprised and perhaps a bit embarrassed to encounter Leopold. "Hello, Captain. I just brought some of Randy's things over from the firehouse."

Leopold nodded. "How's Mrs. Dwyer bearing up?"

"As well as can be expected."

"I just thought I'd stop by and ask a few questions about Randy."
"I'll see you, then." Yount slid into the front seat of the sportscar and backed out the driveway, barely missing Leopold's car parked at the curb.

As soon as he was out of sight, Margaret Dwyer opened the front door. "I thought I heard voices."

"I have just a few questions, Mrs. Dwyer."

"Please come in."

The house was modestly furnished except for a few extravagant touches like an expensive stereo system and a large sofa that looked like something out of a British country house. "I met Jack Yount outside."

"All of Randy's friends have stopped by to bring me things. They know I'm so alone without him. There are no children, you see, and my family's back in England."

"How did you and Randy meet?"

"I married an American and moved to Boston. Soon after we divorced, I met Randy up there. He swept me off my feet."

"What did your first husband do for a living?"

"He was an insurance executive."

"Marrying a fireman must have been quite a change for you. And this city's not Boston."

"No, but I like it nonetheless. I like being able to take the train down to New York when I want to, and come back the same day."

"Will you stay here now or go back to England?"

"Oh, I'll stay in America. Everyone's been so friendly to me here. Perhaps I'll move to New York."

"I have to ask you this, Mrs. Dwyer. Did your husband have any enemies, especially among the men he worked with?"

"No—they got along splendidly."

"Did you all get together socially very often?"

"The boys did occasionally, but not the wives. Of course Mike Rascow's the only one who's married right now. Tony Loma had a painful divorce."

"What about Yount?"

She smiled slightly. "He's a bachelor. Couldn't you tell from that sportscar he drives?"

"Do you know Rascow's wife?"

"Clara? Not well. She's a mousy little thing, isn't she?"

"Did you or Randy ever meet Aaron Pettigrew, the man whose mattress caught fire?"

"No."

"All right, Mrs. Dwyer. Thanks for your help. If I think of anything else, I'll give you a call."

That night he told Molly, "I followed your advice. I talked to the wives today."

She slid a frozen package into the microwave. "What did you find out?"

"Nothing."

"Then maybe there's nothing more to learn."

"Oh, my mind's full of theories, all right. Pettigrew was smoking pot at the time of the fire. He liked to load his gun and play with it. He might have shot Randy Dwyer without fully realizing what he was doing."

"That's one good theory."

"About the only one, really. Building a case for murder here is more difficult than accepting the simple fact that Pettigrew's gun was loaded, it went off accidentally and killed Dwyer. I'll have to talk to him again in the morning and get him to admit he'd put a cartridge into that cylinder."

As it turned out, Leopold didn't get back to Pettigrew. He awoke in the morning with some subconscious memory surfacing in his brain, as it often did when he first woke up. He'd missed something obvious and very important.

One of the autopsy photos of Randy Dwyer had shown an exit wound!

Was he getting that old? Couldn't he spot a major discrepancy like that without having to sleep on it for two nights?

Doc Bueller, a pleasant middle-aged man who served as a part-time assistant to the Chief Medical Examiner, had performed the autopsy. He looked a bit startled when Leopold rushed into his office before nine in the morning, waving the stack of photos he'd sent up to Fletcher's office two days earlier.

"What is it, Captain?"

"These are the Randy Dwyer autopsy photos. This one shows an exit wound. If there was an exit wound, how were you able to recover the bullet?"

"Just a moment." Bueller opened a file drawer to consult his notes.

"Is it possible that some other bullet got mixed up with this case?" Leopold asked him.

"No—I remember removing it myself. It had penetrated the left ventricle of the heart."

"Then how could there be an exit wound? There's only one entrance wound."

"The lead slug might have split apart on impact with a bone. It happens sometimes."

"But you recovered the slug, with its grooves along the side," Leopold reminded him.

"When a lead bullet passes through flesh and bone, it takes a beating, Captain. If it hit the bone at an angle, the head of the bullet may have broken off and continued through the deceased's back. Visually it may have appeared mashed in, but a piece might be missing."

"How would we know?"

"Ask ballistics to weigh it, if they haven't already."

"Can I use your phone?"

"Go ahead."

Ballistics had weighed the bullet, of course. That was part of the normal testing. It was all there. Leopold hung up the phone and turned back to Bueller. "Any other ideas?"

"He must have been hit twice. If there's only one entrance wound, it's because both slugs hit him in the same spot. It's not too likely, I'll admit—"

"—unless the second shot was carefully aimed at the first wound, from close up, and angled toward the heart."

"Well, yes."

"Thanks, Doc."

Leopold went back to his office. Connie Trent entered to tell him she'd found no connection between the ambulance attendant, Scarlata, and the dead man. Leopold hardly heard her.

"He fired a second shot into the wound, Connie! The bastard fired a second shot and we never caught on."

"Who?"

"The killer. Come along with me. It's time for an arrest."

His wife opened the door when they rang. She seemed surprised to see them. "Could we speak to your husband?" Leopold asked her.

"He's just getting up. I'll call him."

When he appeared a few minutes later, Leopold said, "We want to question you regarding the death of Randy Dwyer. You have the right to remain silent and the right to have a lawyer present. I must warn you that anything you say—"

Mike Rascow moistened his lips and glanced back at his wife. "Let's go somewhere and talk."

In the car, Rascow sat in back with Leopold while Connie drove. "There were four of us in that room with him, counting Pettigrew. How'd you know it was me?"

Leopold sighed. He'd handcuffed Rascow when they reached the car, though he still didn't know if it had been necessary. The man hadn't said goodbye to his wife, and Clara Rascow hadn't spoken to him. Perhaps they'd said everything to each other already. "We've established that Dwyer was killed by a second bullet fired into the original entrance wound. Pettigrew couldn't have done that from across the room, and neither could anyone else in all that smoke. Someone used Pettigrew's gun, though. Only you could have done that, Rascow, because you told us yourself that you took the gun away from Pettigrew after the cartridges stopped exploding."

"Yeah, it was me."

"Tony Loma had dragged him into the upstairs hall and thought he was already dead, but when you bent to examine the wound you saw he was still alive. You were there with the gun still in your hand, the gun you'd taken from Pettigrew. You wrapped it with a cloth or a portion of the burned mattress-stuffing to muffle the sound and hide any powder burns, and fired a second shot. With all the noise of hoses and axes, no one heard it. The ammunition had caught fire by accident, after all. You were just helping the accident along a little, making sure he was dead.

Then you just ejected the cartridge from the cylinder and left the gun on the floor. If there were any unfired rounds you took those, too, because you didn't want Pettigrew to be blamed. You wanted it to look like an empty gun."

Rascow was staring out the car window. "I figured it was perfect. I never thought about the grooves on the bullet that would prove it had been fired from a gun."

"Pettigrew probably didn't even remember whether he'd loaded it or not. When he went back and picked up the gun later, it was empty. That was good enough for him."

Connie pulled into the police garage and Leopold helped Mike Rascow from the car. "I guess I don't have to ask what your motive was," he said. "Dwyer's wife Margaret is quite a woman."

Rascow looked surprised. "Margaret? Is that what you think? I didn't kill him for Margaret. I killed him because he was sleeping with my wife. He was sleeping with Clara."

"Q"

ON OUR COVER

Kitty Sullivan was born in St. Louis and began her career in New York in the off-Broadway production of *Morning Sun*. This was followed by her performance as Beth in the musical version of *Little Women*. She has also appeared as Bertha Dorset in *The House of Mirth*, Ophelia in *Really Portable Hamlet* at the Manhattan Theatre Club, Eliza, opposite Rex Harrison in the revival of *My Fair Lady*, and as Nancy in the film, *The Pilot*, starring Cliff Robertson. Her European appearances have been in Dublin and London. In Dublin she played Minnie Powell in *Shadow of a Gunman*, Angela in *Bed-time Story*, Maria in *The Sound of Music* at the Gaiety Theatre, and Agnes in *I Do! I Do!* at the Gate Theatre. In England, Miss Sullivan appeared as Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Sara in *A Touch of the Poet*, and Kate in *Kiss Me Kate*. Her guest appearances on B.B.C. television were in the series, "Me Mammy" and "Tales from the Lazy Acre." Miss Sullivan was a member of the cast of *Theatre at Sea*, produced by the Theatre Guild, and appeared with Helen Hayes, Josh Logan, Dick Shawn, and Patrice Munsel. She also performed at Avery Fisher Hall with Jerry Herman and at Carnegie Hall with The Chieftains. Miss Sullivan most recently played the part of Rita in *Educating Rita*, first off-Broadway, opposite her husband, Milo O'Shea, and later at Bucks County Playhouse, opposite Brian Bedford.

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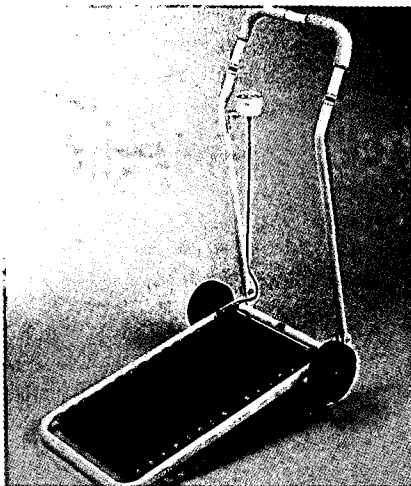
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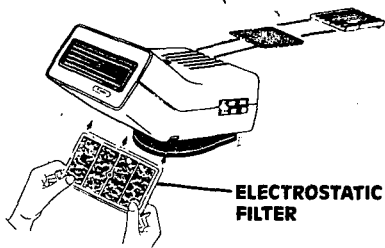
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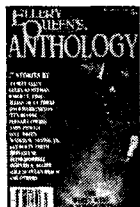
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M5GQ-1

a **NEW** short story by

HELEN NIELSEN

The door of the shed was half open when she reached it. She stepped into a shadowy room containing a dusty workbench and stacks of empty planters. The air was heavy with the fetid odor of fertilizer. Beyond the narrow shaft of doorway light was darkness, and in that darkness a nocturnal assailant could be asleep. Now. At this moment.

Holly's thoughts flooded with the remembrance of Sandra McVey's slashed face and her courage washed away in the flood . . .

THE ONE

by **HELEN NIELSEN**

It was the last run of the night for the Melville City bus that was grinding its way up to the Olympian Hills turnaround. Only one passenger to discharge and the weary driver with E. Gantz lettered on his name tag could turn the vehicle about and make for the yard. That last passenger was a young wife who moonlighted as a waitress at Cobb's Corner Cafe at the bottom of the hill in order to help pay for a house in Millicent Wayne's latest development of scenic estates. A bench sign at the bus stop extolled the advantages: *Live with the Sea and City at Your Feet*. By midnight the sea was no longer visible and most of the city had gone to sleep. Gantz nodded goodnight to the departing passenger and left his seat to check the bus before closing the doors. In the last row, he found a young man who appeared to be asleep. Gantz shook his shoulder.

"End of the line, son," he said. "You have to get off."

The homeless were starting to show up even in Melville City. The man stirred awake. He was clothed in faded denims, a wrinkled

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grey raincoat, and a black knitted cap jammed down over a mass of blond hair. He looked suspiciously out of place in an affluent community and Gantz decided to report him to an officer in the police car he'd seen parked at Cobb's Cafe. Olympic Hills had no security guard. He walked back to the driver's seat and glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure the indigent had left the bus. He hadn't. He had followed Gantz and now stood over him with his right arm raised, a machete clutched in his hand. His eyes had the fire of madness in them and Gantz had no way to escape the blade that flashed forward—then stopped, poised above his head, as a moment of sanity seemed to arrest the descent.

"You—" the man gasped "—you're not the one!"

With that, he turned and fled into the night.

Holly Lombard was the first woman police officer in Melville City to go from meter maid to detective in less than a year. She did it on her merits: college graduate, intelligent, hard-working—and being as attractive in uniform as when she was on campus. Planning to study law, she thought police work would be a good learning experience. On the morning after the bus driver's ordeal, she learned that even Sergeant Mike Chavez could lose his cool.

"Talk about scared! Gantz was shaking so much he could hardly give a report. Forget about this machete guy being a prankster. He's a full-blown nut!"

Chavez's concern was over the second attack in three nights. The first victim, a taxi driver, had been accosted as he waited in his cab. The action was identical—the machete-knife threat followed by a sudden recoil and the words: "You're not the one!" Because there was no physical injury, the incident never made the local press and that ruled out the second attacker as a copycat.

"Some loony tune is looking for someone he wants to cut down to size," Chavez insisted. "We have to find him before he succeeds."

They had nothing to go on but two eyewitness descriptions based on the fragile memories of men scared out of their wits at the time of observation. Officer Bates exercised his artistic skills and sketched a likeness from their reports. The eyes were wild, the blond hair long, and the mouth more childlike than menacing. When Captain Wayne saw the sketch he looked puzzled. "Is it my imagination," he asked, "or does this face resemble Billy Bauer?"

"Billy Bauer's in prison," Chavez answered. "Judge Melville put him there four years ago—for life."

"Without parole," Bates added.

Holly remained silent because four years ago she had never seen Melville City or heard of Billy Bauer. The captain was younger than Chavez, but his words had more authority. "No parole," he agreed, "but there was something else. Bauer became violent at his sentencing and had to be restrained. He was sent to a mental hospital for treatment until he could function in a prison environment. I wonder if he ever got out of there."

Captain Wayne wasn't one to wonder long. He made a telephone call and returned with information that Bauer had escaped from the mental facility five days earlier. Only the state police were notified. "That's bureaucracy for you!" he stormed. "A felon escapes and the jurisdiction where he did his killing is the last to know!" He shook his head. "At least we know who to look for. But where? This city has changed so much in four years, Bauer doesn't have a home to return to."

"But he doesn't know that," Holly suggested.

Captain Wayne turned around and stared at her. He had deep brown eyes and a habit of stroking his moustache with one finger while thinking. He seemed to approve her input. "You're right," he declared. To Chavez he said, "Think about it. Why was Bauer on that particular bus last night? Its route takes the road to the ranch where he grew up. He's looking for something familiar. You knew him, didn't you?"

"I arrested him," Chavez said. "In the trailer where he lived after old Bauer sold out. But that trailer's long gone."

"Then look where it used to be. Bauer's out there and we're going to find him. And take Lombard with you. She may have another good idea."

Melville City was over a hundred years old. Starting as a cross-roads store to service community ranches, it slowly developed a town center with shops, banks, and a newspaper. In recent years, it had crawled up the hills and down to a shoreline with a beach and a marina. The route Chavez took went through an old section where one beautifully restored brick building still bore the sign: *Wayne Commercial Bank* although no bank had been there for thirty years. It now housed the Millicent Wayne Realty office because it was one of the properties Captain Wayne's sister never let go when their father, facing financial ruin, committed suicide. Left with staggering debts and a seven-year-old brother to raise (and barely eight-

een herself), Millicent Wayne sold off acreage and even antique furnishings, but never the bank or the Wayne mansion. Somehow she managed; somehow she prospered. She was a legend in the community, but Chavez had to explain Billy Bauer.

"It was our worst crime since the Spanish dons fleeced the Indians," he began. "A pretty young waitress, Sandra McVey, was found in her house the day after Memorial Day, hacked to pieces with a machete. The tool belonged to a gardener, a nineteen-year-old kid named Billy Bauer. Everybody knew he was retarded but nobody suspected he could be violent."

Chavez drove into the parking lot of Cobb's Corners Cafe where two laborers were unloading a neon sign with BOWLING spelled out in huge letters. "We'll start with Artie Cobb," he explained. "This is where it all began."

Dodging the laborers, they made their way inside the cafe. It consisted of a counter bar and a row of vinyl booths along the opposite wall. At the end of the room, a partition had been removed and a bowling alley was in the process of construction. The sight of Chavez prompted a round-faced man with pale-red hair combed forward over a bald spot to draw two cups of coffee from the urn and place them on the counter.

"Free java for the law is a rule of the house," Artie Cobb announced. "What else can I do for Melville City's finest today?"

"Find a quiet place where we can talk," Chavez said.

Cobb led them back to a small office. It contained a desk, a chair, and a filing cabinet. The walls were covered with photos of a girls' softball team wearing Cobb's Corners T-shirts and shorts. Other photos were of young men in service uniforms, who resembled older men in the same uniforms in newer photos. Some of the faces were familiar: Cobb, Mike Chavez—even Captain Wayne. But what held Holly's interest was a large closeup of a smiling girl from the softball team. It was autographed: "To Artie from 'Kaufax' McVey."

After Chavez explained the reason for his visit, Cobb was shocked. "Billy Bauer on the loose again with a machete!" he exclaimed. "That boy must be mad as a hatter!"

"It looks that way," Chavez agreed. "I recall that Billy used to eat here a lot. He may come back and seem normal—you can never tell with a psycho. Pass the word around to your trucker trade. Billy may try to hitch a ride."

Artie slammed his fist on the desk. "If he comes here he's a dead man! He butchered the best pitcher my team ever had!"

"If he comes here," Chavez insisted, "you do nothing but call the police. That's an order!"

Artie's hands raised in mock surrender. "You got it! If Billy comes in, I'll fix his favorite patty melt and give him change for the candy machine. He was always crazy for peanut-butter bars. I know how to handle him. He only went wild that once."

"Twice," Chavez corrected, "counting that day in the courtroom. It took three of us to handle him then."

The sergeant had to make a telephone call and that gave Artie time alone with Holly. He explained that his girl softball team had been county champions when Sandra McVey was alive. "She was a good looker, too," he said, "good-natured and great with truckers without ever letting them get out of line. She never let any man get out of line—not even me, and don't think I didn't try. Sandy knew what she wanted—a guy who could give her security and dignity. She liked that word dignity." Artie laughed sharply. "She should have stuck with me. I just sold three lots for a cool million. I can buy plenty of dignity with money like that."

Cobb's right arm had somehow encircled Holly's waist. She pulled loose and checked the small tape-recorder that was clipped to her belt. "Be careful what you say to me, Mr. Cobb," she cautioned. "I'll always have recorded evidence."

Chavez returned from the telephone and Holly followed him back to the car. As they pulled out of the driveway, she asked: "Is this where it all began because Sandra worked here?"

"And where she met Bauer," Chavez explained. "Sandra lived in a rental cottage with a lawn and shrubs that needed tending. She heard at the cafe that Billy was a good gardener and worked cheap. He had no choice. He was a throwaway kid."

"Throwaway kid?"

"A foster child. Bauer got him when he was twelve to work on his ranch. He had to send him to school, so he gave Billy his own name. Bauer sold out and moved to a desert condo when Billy was eighteen. He was no longer responsible for the boy, but gave him an old truck and some tools so he could go into business for himself. Billy bought supplies from Yamano Nursery—where I just called to make sure Sam is there. Sam Yamano had an old trailer on the property and let Billy live in it. I found him there after the murder hiding in bed with Sandra's photo clutched in his hands. The machete was in his truck and her blood was all over it."

"Why did he kill her?" Holly asked.

"Billy never talked about that. He said he was innocent."

The nursery was located at the edge of a city well on its way to encircling it. Chavez turned into the driveway and parked the car. While he located Yamano and filled him in on the situation, Holly walked back between rows of plants until she glimpsed a potting shed almost hidden by foliage. She started toward it only to be called back by the sergeant. A message on the police radio ordered their immediate return to headquarters.

It was a delivery-service driver this time. His parked truck had been entered by a man with a machete who fled with the familiar words: "You're not the one!"

Chavez had piqued Holly's curiosity. At her first opportunity, she went to the file room to read everything available on the murder of Sandra McVey.

Murder, she found, was too mild a word. Cobb's "butchered" was more accurate. The crime-scene photos revealed an act of stark brutality. The coroner's report stated that the first blow across the throat had been fatal. The additional blows served only to disfigure a lovely face. Sandra was killed inside her house. Her body, photographed on the floor in front of a mirrored chest, was dressed in a satin negligee that Holly recognized as a designer creation. There was no sign of a struggle. She either knew her assailant or was killed so quickly that no resistance was possible. A postman discovered the body when he found the front door open. Time of death was fixed at early the previous evening. "There was no indication of sexual molestation," the coroner wrote, "but the victim—" The coroner's report stopped midsentence. Holly looked for another page to complete the commentary and found none.

She returned to the police report. Artie Cobb stated that the victim worked the morning shift on Memorial Day so he could march in the veterans parade. For that reason, she got off early in the afternoon—in high spirits, he stressed. "I figured Sandy had a heavy date. After she left, Bauer came in for dinner. He said his machete was missing and that he must have left it at Sandy's and would pick it up on his way home." That information sent the police to Bauer's trailer.

"The suspect was taken into custody when a blood-stained machete was found in his truck," the report continued. "He admitted finding the body when he returned to the victim's house for his machete, but protested his innocence. He blamed the murder on a

soldier he claimed to have seen reflected in a mirror before he fled in panic. He could give no description of the man and appeared to be in shock."

All of Melville City was in shock. This became obvious when Holly read the trial records. District Attorney Daniels ridiculed the "soldier in the mirror" defense. On Memorial Day everyone who had been in service was in uniform. Bauer had seen soldiers everywhere. Why not imagine one in a mirror? Finding the body but not reporting it was proof of guilt.

A public defender named Gavin Shaw produced witnesses who gave Billy Bauer high marks in gardening but nothing in the way of an alibi. Neighbors took no notice of the comings and goings of a gardener and Sandra's house was hidden by shrubbery. A police photo showed only the roofline and a compact sedan parked in the driveway. Ironically, the only witness who gave Bauer support was the mother of the victim.

"Billy came all the way to my house in Walnut Hill to help me plant azaleas," she testified. "He wouldn't take money. He said doing something for Sandra's mother was pay enough." Her words only fired Daniels' accusation that Bauer harbored a mad desire for the victim. The trial was short, the verdict swift.

Holly returned to her desk to find Millicent Wayne seated in her chair with a crime file open before her. The captain's sister was in her fifties—a handsome woman in dress and manner. Her carefully groomed hair had a wing of white brushed back against the ebony. Her dark-blue eyes, usually piercing, were troubled. She didn't notice Holly in time to hide her reaction to the photos. Seeing her, she closed the file instantly.

"Holly, forgive me for taking your chair," she said. "I'm waiting for Steven. My handsome brother is taking us to dinner."

"Taking *us*?" Holly echoed. "He didn't mention it to me."

Millicent smiled knowingly. "That's because I haven't told him yet. We have community business to discuss."

Holly picked up the file and put it in the nearest drawer. Community business had a familiar sound. It wasn't the first time she had been pressed into Millicent's service on civic activities. And Steven Wayne in uniform added prestige to any fundraiser. But today Millicent's timing was bad.

"The captain's had a hectic day," Holly protested. "He always works later than any of us. He may be too tired."

"He has to eat," Millicent insisted. "I have a table reserved at the Grand."

The Grand was the oldest hotel in Melville City. It had a spacious lobby with overhead fans, bad plumbing, and the best dining room in the county. The subject of Millicent's community business was introduced with the first course. It concerned the ceremonial unveiling of a new state-of-the-art fire engine—a project Millicent had vigorously supported. The event included a drawing for valuable prizes and required police protection.

"The committee considered holding the event in the city square," Millicent explained, "but that would create a parking problem. We opted for Friday night at the country club. Asa Melville will make the acceptance speech. I'm relying on both of you to be there."

Millicent could rely with confidence. Judge Asa Melville, grandson of the city's founding father and the wealthiest man in the area, was also Steven Wayne's former father-in-law. His only child, Jewel, had perished in an automobile accident months before Holly arrived in the city. Jewel was never discussed at the office but back-room gossip had it that the captain's wife had been a demon behind the wheel of her Porsche and her alcoholic content at the time of death was never made public.

Conversation took an abrupt turn when District Attorney Daniels came to the table. He was a dapper little man who wore Italian suits and handmade shoes with lifts, and was courageous enough to ignore Millicent in favor of her brother. "Steven," he said sharply, "why wasn't I told of Billy Bauer's escape?"

"I'll answer that question when I find out why I wasn't told," the captain replied.

"Is it true that he's threatening citizens with a machete?"

"It seems so. The latest victim identified his photo."

"Then he's a madman on a vendetta. I demand protection. I'm the one who convicted him."

"And Judge Melville sentenced him," Millicent added.

"Exactly. Asa's in danger, too."

"Not unless he's in uniform," Holly said.

Three pairs of eyes instantly fixed on her. She wasn't a member of the power bloc. She was meant to be passive, not provocative. She had to tell them then about an afternoon spent reading Bauer's case file and learning that he blamed the murder on a soldier he had seen reflected in a mirror.

"But there was no soldier!" Millicent protested.

"Probably not," Holly agreed, "but it's what Bauer *thinks* he saw that matters. He's accosted only uniformed men—a bus driver, a cabbie, a delivery man. They all wore caps with visors."

Steven Wayne moaned softly. "Caps with visors. I forgot that soldier story."

"No wonder," Millicent said. "You were on your honeymoon when the dreadful crime was discovered."

"True, but I should have checked those files myself. Of course Bauer is looking for the soldier! As for protection for anyone, the best I can do with limited personnel is to find him quickly. There are too many guns in the streets these days. Bauer can get himself shot if he waves that machete at the wrong person."

"Especially if *I'm* the person," Daniels vowed.

The captain wasted no time stepping up the search for Bauer. In the morning, Chavez, disguised as a vagrant, was dispatched to haunt the local homeless camps. The homeless were clannish. Sending a policeman to ask about Bauer would turn each one into a deaf mute. It was Holly who was given an official car and sent to the facility from which Bauer had escaped.

"Don't forget your tape-recorder," Wayne ordered. "I want to hear every word Dr. Hubbard has to say about Bauer—if he had any visitors or emotional outbursts or talked about Sandra McVey. Every single word."

It was a ninety-mile drive, but Holly had an appointment and was immediately escorted to Dr. Hubbard's office. It was empty. The only sign of life was a laborer working at a flower bed outside the window. Holly wondered if he was hired labor or one of the inmates. It was disturbing to realize that she was unable to tell the difference, and even more disturbing when the man moved out of sight and reappeared at the office door.

"Oh, hello," he said. "You must be Detective Lombard."

"I am if you're Dr. Hubbard," Holly answered.

He was younger than she expected. He wore a sweater, jeans, and sneakers and had to wash his hands in the lavatory before they could talk. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he apologized, "but I lost my gardener and the plants need attention. Sit down, please. Is that a tape-recorder you've placed on my desk?"

"Do you object?" Holly asked.

"No, not when I know it's there."

"Good. My superior wants an accurate report. He suggested some questions—"

Holly ran through the captain's questions and Dr. Hubbard answered without hesitation. "No, Bauer had no visitors. Not in the two years I've been here. The only time he had an emotional outburst was when an ailing tree on the grounds was to be cut down. His reaction then was a stroke of luck—a breakthrough in communication. He insisted he could save the tree. I let him try and he succeeded. That was when he began to heal."

"*Heal?*" Holly gasped. "Do you think a man who goes around threatening people with a machete is healed?"

"I refer to healing from withdrawal," Hubbard explained. "My first action after coming to this institution was to check the file on each inmate. Working alphabetically made Bauer one of the first. He'd been here two years with little improvement. Regular medication keeps prisoners under control but doesn't cure them. Bauer was classified as retarded and might as well have been mute. But the incident with the tree showed that he had skills and cared about growing things. That gave me a tool to work with. I set him to gardening on the grounds. He began to talk with me about plants. I gave him gardening books and he read them—coming to me at times with difficult words and mastering them. He wasn't so much retarded as neglected. His health had been neglected, too. His medical records showed that the foster parent, having had a problem with his own son's errant behavior, provided Billy with a vasectomy but little else of a medical nature. He'd never so much as seen a dentist."

"But did he understand why he was here?" Holly asked.

"It was months before we touched that subject. But one day Billy called me out to see a new rose in bloom and mentioned that he had planted the same variety in the garden of a lady in Melville City. 'Sandra McVey,' he said. 'She was murdered and people thought I killed her. I couldn't kill a nice lady like Sandra.'"

"Was that all he said?"

"About Sandra McVey, yes. I didn't pressure him. A shock could have caused regression. But nothing was important to him except gardening. He seemed really happy."

"So happy that he made an escape."

Dr. Hubbard smiled wryly. "You forget the terms of Billy's sentence, Officer Lombard. He was to remain in a mental facility until able to function in prison. He was subject to periodic evaluations,

and the last one was positive. Processing for his transfer was under way. He would go from here to a maximum-security prison for life."

"And no parole," Holly recalled.

"And no more gardening. The evaluation was confidential, but nothing stays confidential for long here. I think Billy learned what he was facing and took his chances. Gardening gave him the run of the grounds. The guards think he escaped on the morning garbage truck and wasn't missed until evening. Nothing was missing from the tool shed but a machete."

The captain's questions were answered, but Holly wasn't satisfied. "The prosecutor at Bauer's trial," she recalled, "claimed that failure to call the police when he found the body was proof of guilt. In your professional opinion, Doctor Hubbard, is that true?"

"Not necessarily," Hubbard replied. "All it proves is panic and the natural instinct for flight."

"But what about his possession of the bloody machete?"

"Panic again—and not as damning as if he'd thrown it away."

"One more question. In all the time you spent with Bauer, did he ever seem capable of committing murder?"

"No comment," Hubbard answered. He reached across the desk and switched off the recorder. "I won't go on record second-guessing the courts. Anyone with an emotional time-bomb ticking away inside is capable of anything. I hope Billy Bauer is captured quickly. That last evaluation isn't valid any more."

On her way back to Melville City, Holly stopped at the nursery. Yamano remembered her from the previous visit and set about digging up a magnificent tuberous begonia that she selected from the greenhouse bed. Even the tiny balcony at her apartment could accommodate a hanging basket. The digging left Holly free to visit the old potting shed at the rear of the grounds. It was the logical place for Bauer to stay since his trailer was gone. Her thoughts were filled with the gentle image of Billy that Dr. Hubbard had described and she was eager to find him before he came to harm.

The door of the shed was half open when she reached it. She stepped into a shadowy room containing a dusty workbench and stacks of empty planters. The air was heavy with the fetid odor of fertilizer. Beyond the narrow shaft of doorway light was darkness, and in that darkness a nocturnal assailant could be asleep. Now. At this moment.

Holly's thoughts flooded with the remembrance of Sandra McVey's slashed face and her courage washed away in the flood.

She took a card from her bag and scribbled a brief note. By stretching, she was able to place the card on the bench and, doing so, touched the crumpled wrapper of a peanut-butter candy bar. Holly ran all the way back to her begonia.

Headquarters was under siege from the press and the mayor. Three machete assaults had raised demands for action and the captain had no time to hear the Hubbard interview. He told Holly to leave the tape-recorder on his desk and take the rest of the day off. "You put in extra time last night," he said. "You've got it coming."

Holly went home and hung the begonia. After that, she scanned her refrigerator: cheese but no bread, tuna but no mayonnaise. The situation called for a trip to the deli. She had left the police sedan at Headquarters and driven home in her Escort wagon. It was a short trip to a hot-pastrami sandwich and a soda. She took her lunch across the street to a bench in the library park—her place to feed crumbs to the birds and read a book. She didn't have a book, but she had curiosity, and, when the sandwich was eaten, headed directly to the library newspaper room.

The first date Holly brought up on the viewing screen was Memorial Day, four years past. Several pages carried photos of veterans on parade, dignitaries riding in open cars and speakers on platforms. Surprisingly, Judge Asa Melville, a Legionnaire cap on his white head, shared the back seat of a convertible with Millicent Wayne.

A platform shot showed the mayor flanked by the district attorney and Police Lieutenant Steven Wayne, resplendent in Marine dress blues. Daniels' courtroom observation was true: Bauer would have seen uniforms everywhere. It was two editions later before the discovery of Sandra McVey's body was reported. On the next day Bauer was arrested and that story shared the front page with news of the surprise marriage of Jewel Melville and Steven Wayne. Under a headline FIRST FAMILIES JOIN IN MARRIAGE was a wedding photo of a lovely young bride and a handsome groom. Both wore casual white attire for cruising. They had motored to a chartered yacht on the afternoon of Memorial Day. Some hours later, Judge Melville, Millicent, and a few guests, including the reporter, were flown to the yacht in time for a midnight ceremony. All guests were put ashore the following day and the newlyweds set sail on a lengthy honeymoon.

Holly returned to the Bauer story and followed it to the end of the trial. Prior to the sentencing uproar, an item on the society page

reported the return of the newlyweds, who wouldn't be moving into the historic Wayne house but into a new view home on Seal Rock Drive. The location stirred a memory and Holly brought up a related story from almost three years later. The screen imaged a photo of the twisted Porsche in which Jewel Wayne plunged to her death off Seal Rock Drive. A wooden barrier with glass reflectors stood nearby. A beach dweller identified as Gavin Shaw heard the crash and called the police.

Holly stopped reading. Millicent Wayne had entered the library with an armload of posters touting the fire-engine ceremony. To avoid poster distribution duty, Holly hurriedly escaped by the side door without turning off the viewer.

Driving to Seal Rock Drive, a scenic route along the crest of a hill that left the city behind and the sea ahead, she recognized the entrance to Captain Wayne's house and turned at the viewpoint where his wife had perished. She wasn't morbidly curious—she was trying to catch up with everyone in the department who had lived through what she could only read about. The point now had a steel-and-concrete barrier. She made the turn Jewel Wayne had missed and drove down a narrow lane to the beach road. A sign pointed to Walnut Hill twenty miles inland. Sandra's mother was the one person Billy Bauer might seek out.

Walnut Hill was a town left behind in the freeway era. It reached its full growth before World War II and was approaching senescence. Holly drove slowly down a two-lane street flanked by a large community church, a few stores, and a service station, where she stopped to ask the way to Mrs. McVey's house.

"Which Mrs. McVey?" the station attendant queried.

"Sandra McVey's mother," Holly replied.

The man hesitated, as if pondering whether or not to reveal a state secret, and finally said: "That would be Luella. She's on C Street—Number 304. It's a small white house with lots of flowers."

Azaleas, Holly thought. She had no trouble finding it. The pavement stopped at C Street, but just beyond the corner a familiar compact sedan was parked in the driveway. It hadn't aged a day in four years. Holly left her wagon on the street and walked to the house. The door opened before she could knock, and the woman who faced her was a faded version of Sandra—eyes not so large, smile not so wide. No smile at all when she said:

"Oh, you're not Wilma! I was expecting her to bring my Avon order. You haven't brought it, have you?"

Holly showed her badge. "I've brought this," she said. "Don't be frightened. I'm only here to talk."

Sight of the badge prompted the woman to grasp Holly's arm and draw her inside. Police matters were not to be discussed in public.

It was best to get to the matter of Billy Bauer at once, but Holly told of his escape without mentioning the machete. She reminded Luella that Bauer knew the way to her house. "If he comes again, you must call the police at once. He can be very dangerous."

"Yes, I remember," Luella said, "but I never understood how such a nice boy could do that terrible thing. I hoped all along it would turn out to be the other man who did it."

"What other man?" Holly demanded.

"The man my Sandra was going to marry. She never admitted it, but I knew by the way she carried on. So happy and secretive. She was here for two days before she died. Came to see Cousin Wade. Dr. Wade McVey, that is. He'd always been her doctor. She wanted a checkup—that's what people do now before they marry."

Holly struggled to control her excitement. Of course there was a man! There had to be a reason for that expensive lingerie. "Do you mean the soldier Bauer said he saw in your daughter's house?" she asked.

"I don't know if he was a soldier," Luella answered. "I never found out who he was. I thought he might come to the funeral, but a policeman named Chavez was the only outsider there."

"Sergeant Chavez? Why did he come?"

"Police business. He said if Billy's soldier was real he might show up at the funeral the way murderers do sometimes. But nobody came—not even Sandra's intended. You'd think a man who's gotten a girl in a family way would at least come to see her buried."

The little house became very quiet. Holly heard a clock ticking in the kitchen and a wind-bothered vine scratched at a window pane. Luella's face flushed. "I shouldn't have said that!" she gasped. "My Sandra wasn't the first girl to fall for a no-good. The family kept her secret. Dr. Wade and my nephew, the undertaker. My baby suffered enough without having her name scandalized."

"Did you convince the Melville City coroner to conceal her condition, too?" Holly asked.

But Luella McVey knew nothing about a coroner. She wanted her caller to leave before her mouth ran away with her again, but Holly

persisted. Was there no clue to the man's identity? Had Sandra left no letters—snapshots? All Luella recalled were telephone calls her daughter made after seeing Dr. Wade. Out-of-area calls charged to her credit card. "She was careful not to run up my bill," Luella insisted, "and she left me everything—her insurance, her car—"

"And telephone bills?" Holly suggested.

"Yes. But there was money to pay them."

"Do you still have the bills? May I see them?"

The woman had kept everything that belonged to her daughter. She produced a shoebox stuffed with papers and let Holly, because she swore the contents would remain confidential, go home with the box tucked under her arm.

It was midnight before she finished examining the contents of the box. Sandra's checkbook showed lavish spending in the final months of her life. Boutiques, smart hair salons—standard procedure for a woman thinking of love. Among sales slips and programs from harness races, the last telephone bill was found. Credit calls listed the number called, and Sandra had made four calls on her first day in Walnut Hill, five calls on the second day. All were made to the same number in Melville City and were brief enough to suggest contact with an answering machine.

Sandra's news was urgent. She would call again when she returned home—and be dead before day's end. Holly's impulse to dial the number faltered. If a murderer answered, what could she say?

The coffee Captain Wayne served in his office was hot and strong. Holly thought of it as a morning transfusion. She held the mug in both hands and watched the captain remove her tape recorder from a drawer and slide it across his desk. "I put in a new tape," he said. "The interview is being transcribed. A good job, but your last question wasn't mine." There was a touch of irritation in his words.

"I wanted to get Dr. Hubbard's personal reaction," Holly explained.

"Well, you certainly succeeded. I appreciate initiative in an officer, Lombard, but Bauer is a dangerous felon and our job—our *only* job—is to capture him. Now today Millicent wants you at the country club to help set up security for tomorrow night's wingding. She expects you at two o'clock. Don't let her work you too hard."

It was obviously the wrong time to mention Walnut Hill. Holly returned to her desk, but she couldn't turn off her mind. The puzzle began with the coroner's report and papers can get lost. She dialed

the coroner's office and asked for a copy of the last page of the Sandra McVey report. "A page in our files is missing," she explained. "Our copy ends with an incomplete sentence."

In due time, the coroner's clerk called back with word that no page was missing. The former coroner had been quite elderly and often left sentences unfinished. And no, he couldn't be reached. He was deceased.

Holly wasn't satisfied. Others had read that report.

A bar and grill near the courthouse was frequented by lawyers. Holly found District Attorney Daniels enjoying his lunch. "Sit down, Officer Lombard," he said. "I heartily recommend the sea bass today."

Holly sat down, but only to pose her question about the coroner's incomplete report. She drew a blank.

"I don't recall a problem with that report," Daniels reflected. "Oh, yes, that was the case when the coroner suffered a heart attack and couldn't appear in court. His findings were read by a deputy. What do you think was left out?"

"I think the coroner should have reported that the victim was pregnant," Holly answered,

Daniels put down his fork. "Where did you hear that?"

"My source is confidential. But if you care to verify it, call Dr. Wade McVey in Walnut Hill."

Daniels was shocked, but he was accustomed to courtroom surprises and recovered quickly. "If what you say is true, it doesn't change anything, does it?" he said.

"It proves there was a man in Sandra's life."

"A soldier?" Daniels chided.

"Why not? Someone other than the gardener, certainly. Bauer wasn't physically capable—"

"I'm aware of that," Daniels said quickly, "but if Bauer learned of Sandra's condition, it could have been what triggered his violence. He had a fixation about her. Almost idolatry—"

"Mr. Daniels," Holly interrupted, "I'm not on a jury."

"Lucky me," Daniels murmured. "But a case is tried on evidence, and all of the evidence shouted Bauer's guilt. His weapon, fingerprints, flight—the defense offered nothing to challenge any of it. The public defender was inexperienced—he went into civil practice later—but in view of the facts and the emotional climate of the community, even Clarence Darrow couldn't have gotten Bauer off.

It was a savage crime. For such crimes the public demands a conviction so they can sleep better."

"Then it wouldn't make a difference if another man was in Sandra McVey's house when she was murdered," Holly challenged.

"Of course it would! And if you can produce such a man I want to be the first to know. But you'll have to be able to prove it with hard evidence. Never open a can of worms until you're certain there's fish in the pond."

Holly carried Sandra's telephone bill in her purse. Would it qualify as hard evidence? Instinct cautioned her that Daniels would argue otherwise to defend his own successful conviction. She decided to trace the number on her own.

It was five minutes before two when Holly arrived at the country club and found Millicent Wayne doing what she did best—taking charge. Clad in jeans and a cashmere sweater, she inspected a flag-draped platform that had been erected in the courtyard and directed where the new fire engine would be parked when it was delivered. "It cost more than my grandfather paid for a ranch and half of Melville City's business district," she declared. "It stays under lock and key until tomorrow. And we need a guard for the pickup truck Star Motors donated for the drawing or the teenagers will climb all over it." She saw Holly and came to meet her. "You're hard to catch," she said. "I saw you in the library yesterday but you ran out before I could reach you."

"I'm sorry," Holly said. "I had an appointment."

"Yes. Steven said you've been very busy lately. I hope you don't overdo." A coolness in Millicent's tone belied her smile. "Do you know what that brother of mine suggested? He said the Bauer scare might keep people away tomorrow night. Rubbish! The man hasn't hurt anyone yet and I don't think he will. He's just acting crazy so he won't be sent to prison."

Holly was put to work checking accesses and other locations where security personnel was needed. The presentation ceremony was to be held out of doors where the fire engine could be on display for the public. With club personnel in charge of parking, the police could handle crowd control and any other problems that might arise. The focus would be on the platform where Millicent was now directing location of the lights. She paused to take something out of her Louis Vuitton handbag and found a neatly folded check.

"Oh, God," she moaned, "I forgot to leave this with the committee! It's a donation I deposited in my account to pay the balance due on the fire engine. It won't be delivered without full payment. Holly, dear, can you run this over to my office?"

Gofer she might be, but Holly was eager to get away. There was still time to visit the telephone company and check out the number on Sandra McVey's old bill. She drove to the realty office first. As she removed the check from her bag, it slipped from her fingers and fell open in her lap. She saw that it was drawn on Millicent Wayne's personal account and imprinted with her name, address, and telephone number. The number Sandra had called nine times from Walnut Hill.

Hands trembling, Holly dug the old bill out of her bag and checked. Digit by digit, the number was the same. She ran into the office and handed the check to the first warm body she met. She wanted to be rid of it. She wanted never to have seen it at all. Still shaken, she returned to her car and sat reviewing all she had learned about a pretty waitress who wanted to marry well, liked expensive things, and craved dignity. She didn't date truckers, but police officers frequented the cafe and one of them was Steven Wayne, who lived in the family mansion with his sister.

But the unthinkable was still unthinkable. The murder was too savage. Maybe Sandra had been threatened and had called the captain for protection, Holly mused. Maybe Cobb molested her. Before she could finish the thought, the opposite door of the wagon was jerked open by a shabby unshaven man with a malevolent grin.

Sergeant Chavez slid into the seat beside Holly before she could scream. "Mind if I join you?" he said.

"You look terrible!" Holly gasped.

"Thanks. I'm proud of this disguise. Some of the homeless even offered me food. So far, though, nothing but false reports of Bauer sightings. Which reminds me, I have something of yours." Chavez reached into a pocket of his ragged jacket and handed Holly the card she had left in the nursery shed. "I noticed that shed, too," he explained. "I went back to check it out and found your message: 'Billy Bauer, call me. I want to help you.' Do you want to get yourself killed? You shouldn't have gone in there alone!"

"I didn't *go* in," Holly protested. "I *reached* in."

"And what does the message mean? How do you think you can help a psycho?"

"Keep him alive if he turns himself in. Captain Wayne said Bauer could be shot if he threatens someone who's armed."

"Okay, but the captain gave me orders to look out for you. He likes you. You're woman enough to sense that."

Chavez's words would have been interesting before Holly saw Millicent's check. Now they were confusing. "You think a lot of the captain, don't you?" she asked.

"And for good reason! How do you think I made sergeant in this Anglo town? He went to bat for me. He's the best there is, partner. He deserves better from life than he's had so far."

"Do you mean because his wife was killed?"

"More than that. He married a rich girl who couldn't cut it as a cop's wife. Everything Jewel Melville wanted, she got. She wanted a romantic marriage and honeymoon on a yacht and Daddy bought it for her. She wanted a view house on a cliff. Daddy bought it for her. But she wanted Steve Wayne for a playmate and he's a born workaholic. So little Jewel hit the bottle and found other playmates. That marriage was doomed long before the accident." Chavez turned around and peered into the back of the wagon. "Do you happen to have a thermos of coffee back there?" he asked.

"No," Holly said, "but I'll drive you to a coffee shop."

Chavez opened the car door and stepped into the street. "I can't risk being seen with you," he said. "It would blow my cover."

In the morning, Holly turned in her report for country-club security but skipped the coffee break. After what she had learned, it seemed best to avoid Captain Wayne. She stayed at her desk and checked the night report. A citizen had fired a shotgun at a prowler who carried a long knife. The prowler fled, leaving no trail of blood to show he had been hit or that he was Bauer. But fear was in the streets and fear never asked for I.D. When Holly remembered that the McVey file was still in her desk, she returned it to the record room. There she found the captain searching through the stalls.

"Were you looking for this?" she asked, offering the file.

He accepted it and opened the cover. The photo of Sandra's mutilated face was the first thing he saw. There was no change of expression on his face. "It's too bad you had to get involved in a messy case like this," he said.

"It's my job, sir," Holly replied.

"Well, you should have easier duty tonight. Millicent's planned a real big party . . ."

Actually, it was more like a carnival. When Holly reported to the country club for duty, the courtyard was festive with lights and colored balloons. A uniformed high-school band played behind the celebrity guests on the platform, and every citizen with a chance of rating photo space in the press was dressed fit for a presidential visit.

The publicity about Billy Bauer appeared to have no effect on the crowd. Holly was stationed near the foot of the platform steps when Artie Cobb, sporting a tuxedo and a red bow tie, took the microphone to announce the winner of two dinners at Cobb's Corners Cafe and soon-to-be bowling alley. Boyd Daniels' response from the platform was loud and clear.

"The winning couple was divorced yesterday. Hey, Shaw, you handled the settlement! Who gets custody of the dinners?"

"I do," Shaw answered, "as soon as they get my bill."

Shaw, as in Gavin Shaw, ex-public defender. Shaw, Daniels, Artie Cobb—even Judge Melville, who was escorted to the platform by Captain Wayne—all of them had played a part in Billy Bauer's conviction. All were logical targets for his fury. The thought made Holly more aware of the crowd in the courtyard than what was happening on the platform. No rational fugitive would venture into an area so well policed.

But Bauer wasn't rational.

Not all of the people were well dressed. One seedy-looking man held Holly's attention until he stepped under a light and became Chavez still in disguise. He elbowed slowly but determinedly toward the platform as if following someone. Holly scanned the crowd ahead of him and searched for possible quarry. Smiling faces were no good—the face she sought would be as intense as Chavez. She caught a glimpse of a man in a grey raincoat just as Millicent called down from the steps above.

"Holly, you can make my night! Steven says you have a tape recorder. I'm to be made an honorary fire chief and such an event should be preserved!"

Millicent, striking in a red gown, flashed a persuasive smile and Holly relinquished the recorder without comment. Chavez was out of sight when she looked at the crowd again, but the raincoat was getting closer. The man stopped when the fire chief began to speak and Holly saw that he was young, with long hair showing beneath a black-woollen cap. The night was clear and warm, yet he wore the raincoat pulled tight at his throat. He had to be Billy Bauer.

The dread she had felt at the nursery shed held Holly motionless. She couldn't signal Chavez because he was no longer in sight. She couldn't shout above the loudspeaker where the fire chief had just presented Millicent with an honorary badge for her tireless fundraising effort and, in a gallant gesture, whipped off his chief's cap and placed it on her head. Holly heard applause but didn't take her eyes from Bauer. He moved closer to the platform, studying every face, until he saw the steps leading to the platform and Holly. He started toward them.

Holly took her gun from the holster. Bauer was only a few feet away but so focused on the steps he didn't even see her. "Stop or I'll shoot!" Holly ordered.

On the platform above her, it was now Judge Melville's voice that drowned out her words. On the stairs behind her, Millicent began to descend, with her brother following. Across the courtyard, Chavez appeared again but too far away to be of help as Billy Bauer drew a machete from a sheath under his raincoat and raised his arm.

"Billy, don't make me shoot you!" Holly shouted.

But he had reached the steps and there was no other way to stop him. She aimed at the hand holding the knife, but Bauer reached up as she fired and the bullet caught him in the chest. Millicent screamed as he fell at her feet. His lips moved, and his fingers let loose of the machete and clawed at the earth until he died.

Everybody talked to Holly. First were the reporters who never knew when to stop. Later it was a police psychiatrist, who made no progress because Holly couldn't reveal her fear that she had killed an innocent man. A basket of flowers from Millicent expressed her gratitude and Captain Wayne informed Holly that she would receive a commendation for bravery. She objected to being honored for killing Billy Bauer.

"You're looking at it the wrong way," the captain argued. "The commendation isn't for killing a man but for saving a life—my sister's life. You had to shoot Bauer. I saw his face—absolutely mad! Millicent was wearing the cap the chief gave her, so he attacked her, just like with the others."

Holly was ready to turn in her gun and badge, but the captain refused them. "You're too good an officer to run from a problem," he insisted. "Give it some time. I have a small horse ranch in the valley. The trainer and his wife will look after you if you want to stay until you're ready to work. Animals are good therapy."

"Trotting horses?" Holly asked.

The captain smiled. "How did you guess? I race them—drive them myself at times."

Holly tendered unfelt thanks for the offer and opted for some time alone. She wanted to get away at once, but Chavez had found the recorder where Millicent dropped it when Bauer was shot. The tape of the honor ceremony had to be delivered. Holly went home to her apartment and examined the machine. Millicent had neglected to shut it off after the chief's speech. Holly rewound the tape, knowing full well that she would play it through and be forced to relive the shooting. And she did play it—again and again.

And then she dialed the office of Boyd Daniels to report that Officer Lombard had found fish in the pond.

The District Attorney was a thorough man. A week passed before he sent Holly to the Wayne residence. It was a grand old Victorian house built in the early flush of riches when the first Wayne vied with the first Melville for status and power. It stood on high ground, its cupola commanding a view of the sea. Legend had it that Melville's cupola was two feet higher until lightning struck the Wayne house and it was rebuilt three feet higher than before. Old Melville retaliated by adding a flagpole.

The interior was as impressive as the exterior. What antiques Millicent was forced to sell in years of poverty had been replaced or duplicated. The house was the showplace of every heritage tour.

A maid met Holly at the door and took her to a room where Millicent was pouring coffee into bone-china cups. Holly declined the coffee. "This isn't a social call," she said.

Millicent drank deeply from her cup. "A pity," she replied. "It's excellent coffee. But I'm sure you're accustomed to the dreadful brew served at Cobb's Corner Cafe, where the waitress you're so interested in worked years ago. Don't look so shocked, Holly. I know you've been prying into that case—checking files and old newspapers. You're supposed to turn off those library viewers, you know. What is it you imagine that you've found?"

Holly was shaken by the woman's directness but responded in kind. She produced Sandra's telephone bill with calls to Millicent's number. "Nine calls in two days after learning that she was pregnant," Holly observed. "She had an urgent message for someone in this house, but your brother never knew what you erased from the machine, did he? And who is more familiar with city hall than

Millicent Wayne? It was easy for you to destroy the last page of the coroner's report so your brother would never suspect that he had fathered Sandra's child."

"That's a lie!" Millicent's coffee spilled when she slammed the cup down on the table. "You haven't a shred of proof that Steven had a relationship with that woman! She was trying to get him with the oldest trick in the book. If she was pregnant, it was because she planned it that way!"

"You may be right," Holly conceded, "but she could have stopped his marriage to Judge Melville's daughter. You couldn't risk that. Sandra must have called again when she returned from Walnut Hill. She knew nothing about your brother's impending marriage and had no reason to doubt your word that he would come to her after the parade. She got off work early, came home, and donned that expensive lingerie. She was expecting Steven and would be sure to open the door when she saw his tunic and cap."

Holly paused. Millicent had risen to her feet. She was tense but had an almost amused expression on her face.

"I was hung up for a while trying to get the captain into uniform," Holly continued. "He had to come home after the parade and change into his wedding clothes. Even if he'd been able to return from the yacht and kill Sandra, he wouldn't have been in uniform. I tried other scenarios: Artie Cobb, who wanted a woman who didn't want him. Mike Chavez, whose loyalty could have made him kill to protect his friend. But Chavez arrested Bauer and would have been recognized at once, as would Cobb. But it all came clear the night Bauer died. You wore the fire chief's cap and Bauer attacked—and this time he didn't run away. He meant to kill because you were the soldier in the mirror."

"I thought you saw the police psychiatrist," Millicent said icily. "He should have put you in a strait-jacket."

"All you had to do was wear your brother's uniform," Holly added. "Bauer's forgotten machete was an unexpected bonus."

Millicent was no longer amused. She stalked to a telephone on a table across the room. "I've heard enough of this nonsense," she announced. "I'm calling Boyd Daniels to make a complaint."

"He's busy," Holly said, "taking Gavin Shaw's statement that Jewel was on the way to his house the night her car took a shortcut over the cliff. Shaw was arranging the property settlement for your sister-in-law's divorce. She planned to take the house, the car—everything—and leave your brother with only his job and a

negative position with the most influential man in the city. But I'm sure you were aware of that."

Millicent made no attempt to speak. She put down the telephone as Holly continued. "Daniels told me something odd about that accident. It first appeared that the vehicle hit the barrier as it plunged down the cliff, but there was no sign of impact on the wood—just a scrap of glove leather caught on an edge of metal framing one reflector and a blood smear on the glass. He concluded that the barrier was removed before the accident and has tested blood from every vandalism suspect arrested since Jewel Wayne died. You know about blood, don't you? All that's needed to identify whoever moved that protective barrier is to find a match for the blood."

Holly took the tape recorder from her bag. "It's ironical, Miss Wayne, that you used my recorder the night Billy Bauer died. It was still running when he was shot and recorded what we couldn't hear in all the confusion—his dying words."

"Stop right there!" Millicent ordered. "The words of a legally insane man can't be used as evidence! Daniels knows that!"

Holly smiled. "Then it's for him to decide," she replied. "He's already aware of the information I've given you and it had a remarkable effect. He widened his search for a match of the blood on the barrier. You made a recent donation to the blood bank that Daniels had analyzed. Miss Wayne, it's my duty to inform you that you have the right to remain silent—"

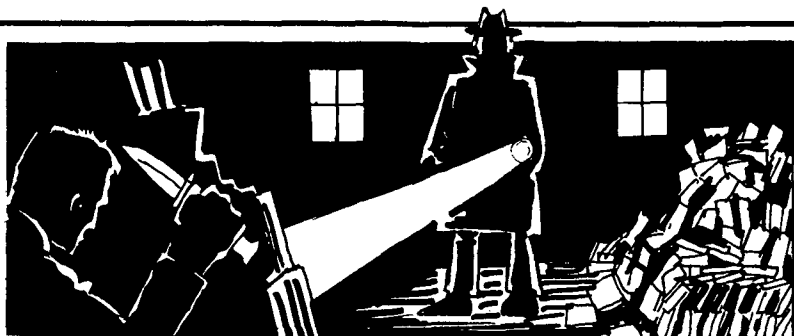
"What are you doing?" Millicent cried.

"Reading you your rights. I was sent here to arrest you for the murder of Jewel Melville Wayne. Blood is evidence and yours is on that reflector. And I think you should hear what Billy Bauer said to you before he died, even if it isn't evidence."

Holly turned on the recorder. After the shouted warnings, the gunshot, and Millicent's scream, there was the sound of labored breathing as Bauer's last words were gasped into the recorder.

"You—you killed her! You're the one!"





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THE BLACK KITTEN

by A. H. Z. CARR

The Reverend Dr. Walter Sloane sat in the little book-crammed room that he called his study, composing a sermon on Religion and the Fight Against Crime. The process of creation was not aided by his seven-year-old daughter Ellen, who was tramping up the stairs of the house sounding like a regiment and calling, "Little Black Sambo! Here, Little Black Sambo!" Her adored kitten was lost regularly several times a day—one of Elly's dark schemes, he suspected, for creating a small but noisy crisis to compel his attention.

He knew where the tiny thing was—somewhere in the study. He had heard its plaintive mew a little while before. To open the door and invite Elly in to find the kitten, as she expected, would utterly derail his train of thought, so he decided to finish at least the paragraph he was working on before capitulating.

"Sambo-scambo!" yelled Elly in the corridor. Her father smiled and winced at the same time—a complicated facial gesture that summed up his feelings of the moment about Elly. After a while, she galloped away, miaowing. "We must recognize," he wrote, "that the police are a punitive, not a preventive, force in the fight against crime. We cannot expect them to assume the whole burden of—"

He reached for his stubby briar pipe, which had gone out, debated for an instant whether to go through the ritual of emptying, cleaning, filling, lighting, and tamping, and compromised by putting a match to what tobacco remained in the bowl. But the first whiff was acrid, and before laying it aside he looked at the pipe as if it had

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betrayed him. Taking up the pen, he wrote down some words: "Throughout history, only one power—"

"Little Black Sambo is a dambo!" Elly, who herself had the wide-eyed willfulness of a spoiled kitten, would often bring the syllable "damn" into her soliloquies; she had learned that it made adults look at her. He focused on the slow sentence before him: "Throughout history, only one power has consistently struck at the roots of criminality—the power of religion, reaching the masses with its great moral principles."

It would not be a proper sermon, he realized. Too abstract. A dangerous adjective in his profession.

His lean, big-boned face grew taut. A certain polite restlessness in his congregation had of late suggested that they were finding these large, remote subjects somewhat tiresome. They had liked him better when he encouraged them to think that God took a friendly interest in their personal problems.

He recalled remarks he overheard as people were leaving church the previous Sunday. Not one word had been said about the sermon; they were all talking about a sour note struck by the organist in the closing hymn, and he could have sworn they were almost grateful for it. Not that he blamed them. He knew, better than they, that the power to fill the church with the flutter of angel's wings had left him. It would be sheer hypocrisy on his part to try to recapture that vein.

Elly was now singing, "I love Little Sambo, his coat is so warm." It had been several days, he remembered guiltily, since he had last joined her in play. But in a few minutes he would let her in, and they would find Little Black Sambo together.

The kitten was the first living thing that was completely Elly's. Her life at home had revolved around it ever since Miss Wylie, her schoolteacher, had telephoned to say that Elly had earned a prize for the best drawing in the class. "Do you think a kitten would make her happy? My cat has just had three, and Elly is the right age to have a pet."

"A good idea," he had said.

But Miss Wylie had evidently sensed a reservation, for her voice grew cool. "Please don't think that I'm foisting unwanted cats on my pupils. There'll be no problem in finding homes for these kittens. They're utterly charming. If it's the slightest bit inconvenient—"

"Not in the least," he had reassured her quickly. "I've been thinking about getting Elly a pet. Thank you very much." And this time his voice had carried conviction.

The kitten had taken over the house, a scurrying little black comet on unsteady legs, romping, mewling, appearing in unexpected places, making small messes when it was too far away from its box, ready to play endlessly with Elly, scratching at Dr. Sloane's shoes, demanding attention, falling downstairs, laboriously clambering up again—evoking laughter one moment and dismay the next.

Elly really ought to look after it more carefully, the minister supposed, but it would do no good to tell her so. Since the death of her mother two years earlier, the child's pixie sense of power had grown to the point where he could no longer depend on obedience from her unless he was seriously angry. When they played together, her chief enjoyment seemed to come from asserting her will, and he thought it significant that in *Alice in Wonderland* her favorite character was the Duchess.

Which of them, he wondered, had suffered more from the loss of Frieda's warm white bosom and gift of tenderness—the child who hardly remembered her, or he who remembered her too vividly? If, in his pastoral counselling, he had been called on to advise in a case like his own, he would unhesitatingly have stressed Elly's need, would have pointed out the dangers of prolonged asceticism for a full-blooded widower, not yet forty.

Yet when several eligible women in his congregation made unmistakable their readiness to remedy his single state and Elly's mother-lack, he became filled with alarm. Work had become his refuge from their attentions and from his own thoughts—committee meetings, sick visits, preaching, lecturing, fund-raising, correspondence, organizing Scout work, remodeling the church, supervising the social and athletic programs, joining civic groups to combat juvenile delinquency. Where was the time for courtship, even if he had known the right woman?

Dr. Sloane shrugged fretfully and kept his fountain pen spinning out its spidery trail on the white paper: "Today, more than ever before, we can see that society is paying a gruesome penalty for its prevailing indifference to religion."

A strident peal from the telephone in the hall below arrested his hand. This was Saturday. Mrs. Hughes, the elderly woman who came in weekdays to keep house for him, was not there. It was an absurd economy not to have a telephone extension in the study, but the life of a minister—certainly the minister of a small and impecunious church—was made up of absurd economies.

He got up hastily.

He saw it at the last instant—as his right foot was descending. The sight of it paralyzed not his muscles but his will. For that instant his foot hovered helplessly, then the piercing squeal and the soft crushing sensation under his heel came together and he looked down with horror at the wreck he had made of the little black kitten. Bright blood gushed from its mouth as it lay twitching on the wood floor. Almost simultaneously he heard Elly's voice, now from her playroom: "Daddy! The telephone!"

Instinctively he acted to stop her from running into the study. He opened the door, and in a voice which he managed by prodigious effort to keep casual he called, "Elly dear, will you answer it? Talk to whoever it is until I get there."

She loved to answer the telephone, and her footsteps thudded downstairs. He spread out a newspaper and his face twisted as he gently lifted the kitten. Its soft warm body was broken beyond hope, but the agonized eyes looked at him, the irises black and enormous. When he put the kitten down on the newspaper, there was blood on his shaking hands. He wiped them with his handkerchief.

"Daddy! Daddy! It's somebody for you."

He needed time. Drawing a deep breath, he said, too loudly, "Who is it, Elly?"

"A lady. Mrs. Somebody." She probably knew the name, but pretending not to know was one of her teasing games. The kitten's tiny legs jerked feebly. He couldn't leave it there for her to discover, and a closed door was only an invitation to Elly. Panicky, he lifted the bed of paper on which the dying kitten lay and put it into a desk drawer.

"Daddy?"

"Coming, dear." There was a small hooked rug in the room; he spread it over the blood on the floor before he hurried downstairs.

"He's coming," he heard Elly say. Conscious of her dark eyes staring at him curiously, he avoided looking at her. A glimpse of his face in the hall mirror showed how pale and distraught he looked.

The call was from Miss Agatha Goss, the church organist. "Oh, Dr. Sloane, I hope I'm not disturbing you. I'm calling to find out whether the new hymnals have arrived for the choir rehearsal to-night."

He had to clear his throat several times before he could say, "I don't think they've come." As he spoke, he looked at his right shoe and saw a smear of blood on the rim of the sole. *If thy right foot*

offend thee, cut it off, his thoughts paraphrased. He said, "If they arrive, I'll let you know," and hung up rudely.

Elly was at the foot of the staircase, waiting for him. Her round little face, under its helmet of dark straight hair cut in a Dutch bob, wore an expression of intense solemnity. For a heart-stopping instant he thought of telling her the exact truth. *Darling, there's been an accident. Sambo is badly hurt. Try to understand, Elly dear. To prevent him from suffering, he will have to be put away. We'll have him put out of his pain. We can get a new kitten, and maybe a new puppy dog, and in time we will love them just as much.*

The trouble was that she would insist on seeing the kitten—he saw no way to prevent that, once she knew—and his image of her shock and horror blotted out every other consideration. Later, now, he would tell her the truth, console her, make up to her for everything—later, when the kitten was disposed of and the blood had been washed away.

"Daddy, have you seen Little Black Sambo?" Elly asked. "He's lost again."

"Not in the last little while," he evaded. "Would you like to do something for me, Elly?"

"What?" she said cautiously.

"I feel like hearing some nice music on the radio." It was a suggestion to which she might assent; she loved to fiddle with the radio, usually a forbidden pastime.

"Oh, yes," she said.

"Some nice music," he repeated.

As soon as she went into the living room, he sped upstairs. When he opened the bottom desk drawer, the little body was still struggling to live. Dr. Sloane could not suppress a groan. Hastily he picked up the newspaper, wrapped it loosely all around the kitten, and carried it down the stairs as quietly as he could. The radio was beginning to chatter wildly; Elly's idea of great fun was to race through the wave bands touching every station on the way.

If Mrs. Hughes were here to keep an eye on Elly, he could steal out to the garage, drive over to the veterinary hospital, and have the poor little thing put to sleep. It was painless and quick. But Mrs. Hughes was not here, and to leave Elly alone in the house was unthinkable.

The stairs creaked loudly under him—he was a big man—and Elly must have heard him or sensed something peculiar in his absence. She poked her dark head into the hall and shouted above the

blast of a commercial, "Where you going, Daddy?"

"There's something I have to do," said Dr. Sloane. "How about that music?"

"The tastiest, biggest bottle of thirst-quenching pleasure," the radio gibbered. Elly was staring at the crumpled newspaper in his hands.

"Is that a surprise? For me?"

Surprise presents were a frequent enough occurrence in her life so that she no longer snatched at them. "No," he said. "I spilled something."

"What?"

"Just some gluey stuff. A mess." Firmness now might prevail. "Elly, either you get some music on that radio or shut it off."

She made a face. "You look funny," she said. As she ran back to the radio and began again to course through the wave bands, Dr. Sloane went down into the cellar, knowing the heart of a murderer who has almost been caught red-handed.

The thought of what had to be done appalled him.

Unwrapping the newspaper, he prayed that the kitten was dead. But he saw that blood still trickled from the tiny mouth and there was still life in the glazed eyes. Drowning, poison—they were too slow, too cruel. And he could never bring himself to wring the kitten's neck. Ether, chloroform—he had none. A blow on the head? Yes, one quick, merciful blow—

The radio upstairs had been turned over to a cheerful crooner who was confiding that he loved to get a loving letter, but there was one that he loved better, the one that said enclosed find check. The hammer in the tool kit.

With sick loathing, Dr. Sloane put a heavy fold of the newspaper over the head of the dying kitten and brought the blunt weight down. "God forgive me!" he said aloud. He forced himself to look, to make sure the kitten was dead, and he died himself a little at the sight. Breathing with his mouth open, as if he had been running hard, he looked around for a place to hide the body until Elly was asleep and he could dig a grave in their small garden.

The cellar door opened and Elly bounced down the steps.

"Elly!" he cried. "Go upstairs!"

She began to say, "Daddy, what are you—?" And then she saw the dead kitten on the bloody newspaper.

Her scream ran through his body like a flash of pain. As he took a step forward, she backed away, and he realized that her eyes, big

and black like the kitten's, were fixed in terror on the hammer in his hand.

"Oh, no!" he whispered, and flung the hammer away as if it had bitten him. The crash that it made on the concrete floor touched off another scream such as he had never heard before. "Elly darling," he said, and tried to take her in his arms. She fought him—kicking, pummeling, scratching—and all the while her thin reedlike scream went on and on, broken only by the sobbing intake of her breath.

"Elly, listen," he begged. "You don't understand!"

"Sambo," she mumbled, "you killed Sambo!" and she tried to go to the kitten's smashed body. Dr. Sloane caught her by the shoulder and swung her into his arms. Her small fists struck him in the face repeatedly, with all her might, as he carried her upstairs. He didn't try to stop her blows. The despairing thought in him was that he had failed her utterly, else how could she think he would deliberately kill her kitten. His nose began to bleed as they reached the hall, and several drops of blood fell on Elly's yellow dress. The crooner's lilt made an eerie accompaniment to her crying.

"Elly," Dr. Sloane begged. "Elly baby, it was an accident—"

But against the terrible evidence of her eyes, his protests were useless.

He set her, struggling, on a chair. Instantly she broke away and ran shrieking to the front door. She was out of it before he could stop her.

"Elly!" he called in agonized pursuit.

And when he caught her, she screamed, "You killed him! You killed him!" and kicked at her father's legs.

It was a grey, misty day, and there was a cold wind. Several passersby stopped. One, a stout fur-coated woman, said, "Why, there's blood on that child's dress!"

"What's happened?" another asked, joining the little group.

"Somebody's been killed!"

"It's her kitten—" Dr. Sloane tried to explain and hold Elly at the same time. Her fierce little shoes kept pounding at his shins. *She hates me*, he thought with dread.

At last he succeeded in pinioning her legs and carrying her toward the house. She shuddered convulsively in his arms.

"What have you been doing to the child?" an indignant male voice asked.

The woman in the fur coat looked at his clerical collar and gasped. "And him a minister!"

"The things that go on," said the man. "It ought to be reported."

Dr. Sloane carried Elly inside and swung the door shut behind him. She stopped struggling, but her sudden limpness was more alarming than her frenzy. Her breathing now had a faint rasping note. He put her down on the sofa in the living room, where she lay inertly on the soft green cushions. After a few moments, he mastered his trembling body, shut off the blaring radio, moved to the telephone, and dialed the number of Dr. Harris, the physician who had attended Elly since her birth.

The first slow rings were cords of sound tightening round his diaphragm. Presently a detached female voice said, "Dr. Harris' office."

"This is Walter Sloane," he said. "Is Dr. Harris—?"

"Who did you say is calling?"

"Walter Sloane. I must speak to Dr. Harris!"

"Sorry, I didn't get the name."

He tried desperately to remain calm. "Sloane—Dr. Sloane of the West Side Community Church."

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry, Dr. Sloane, but Dr. Harris won't be in until this afternoon. Can I give him a message?"

"It's my daughter. She's—"

"One moment, please." Dr. Sloane heard a murmur of female voices; it was perhaps half a sick minute before the receptionist brought her attention back to him. "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

"I think it's a state of shock. There was an accident."

"Can you describe her injuries?"

He said, "The accident was to her kitten. The child has had a brutal shock and hysterics."

"I see." The composed voice implied that he was another fussy parent without a sense of proportion. "I'll tell the doctor when he comes in."

"You don't understand," Dr. Sloane said with quiet rage. "This is serious. If you can possibly reach him—"

"Dr. Harris is at the hospital. I don't think I can get him now, but I'll leave a message for him to call."

"Call him now! Without delay! And tell him to call me!" Dr. Sloane hung up.

He returned to the sofa and looked down at the crumpled, blood-stained little figure. How long would she carry with her the nightmare memory of her father standing guiltily over a dead kitten with a hammer in his hand? The question filled his mind as he stood

watching her chest rise and fall with each long breath.

He dared not carry her to her bed for fear she would wake, so he spread his topcoat over her and turned up the thermostat of the oil burner.

When the telephone sounded, he sprang to it and spoke in a low voice. "Harris? Thank God." He tried to be direct as he explained.

"The way things happen," Harris said feelingly. "Don't blame yourself. You couldn't help it. How is she now?"

"Sleeping, but it doesn't sound like natural sleep."

"That's often the way after hysteria. Much better than having to knock her out with drugs. Keep her warm."

"Yes, I've done that."

"Now, listen, Dr. Sloane. I'll get there as soon as I can, but there's an emergency here at the hospital and it may take some time. The child will probably sleep for an hour or two, anyway, if I know these cases. If she wakes up before I arrive, there ought to be someone else in the house. Someone besides you, I mean. It might be better if she doesn't see you until she's had a chance to adjust."

Dr. Sloane said dully, "Yes, I see."

"A woman would be best. Do you know some motherly type Elly likes? It ought to be a friendly, familiar face. And she'll have to talk to the child."

"I'll think of someone." Dr. Sloane's family was a thousand miles away. And old Mrs. Hughes had never been able to cope with Elly. His mind quested doubtfully among the wives of his friends, seeking one gentle and wise enough to serve the child's need.

"Something else you might think about," said Harris, "is another kitten. Best way to take Elly's mind off the one she has lost. If you can get her to accept another, you'll be halfway over the bridge."

Instantly, as Harris disconnected, Dr. Sloane thought of Miss Wylie, Elly's schoolteacher. He fumbled with the telephone book. There were a number of Wylies, but only three women's names among them. The second of these, Miss Carla Wylie, answered the ring, and she had the calm voice that had spoken to him before. When he identified himself, she said with the hint of a laugh, "I suppose you're calling about the kitten."

Startled, he said, "Yes. I'm afraid—"

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'll gladly take it back."

"It isn't that. The kitten has had a fatal accident. I'm sorry to have to tell you this."

Her voice, when it came through, was even and controlled. "Is Ellen all right?"

"I'm not sure. There's been a crisis here, which is my only excuse for telephoning you. Sambo—that's what Ellen called the kitten—met a tragic death. My fault, and Ellen's had a terrible shock."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"I have no right to ask this—"

"Of course you have. What is it, Dr. Sloane?"

"Dr. Harris thought another kitten would be a good idea."

"I understand. That's all right. I've got Little Black Sambo's twin brother—or maybe sister, I never can tell with kittens. When do you want him?"

"The trouble is, I'm alone with Elly and can't get away. I'd like to have the kitten here when she wakes up, if that's possible. It could be very important to her. Is there any way—?"

"Of course. Just let me have your address." He gave it, and she said, "I'm not far. I'll have the kitten there in a few minutes."

She struck him as intelligent and competent, and as he replaced the receiver he wondered if he might persuade her to stay with Elly through the awakening. Tiptoeing back to the living room, he saw with relief that she was still asleep.

He sank into a chair.

A few seconds later, the sharp ring of the doorbell jolted him and he hurried to the door. A thickset policeman with a fat friendly face stood on the stoop. There was a squad car at the curb. "Sorry to bother you, Reverend," the officer said, "but some woman's made a complaint at the station. It doesn't make much sense, but she said you were beating up a little girl on the sidewalk."

Dr. Sloane could feel his face flushing. "That's nonsense, of course."

The policeman grinned. "We get these crank complaints. But she said the child was screaming and bloody all over, so we had to look into it."

"It's a misunderstanding. There was an accident." The expression on the policeman's face changed. "You'd better come in."

The officer entered, removed his visored cap, and reached for his notebook. He said slowly, "My name's Kogan. You know how it is, when they file a complaint we've got to make a report. Better give me the facts, Reverend."

Dr. Sloane pointed to the sofa. "I don't want to wake her up. Let's go into the kitchen. We can keep an eye on the living room from there."

Hesitating, Kogan said, "Is she okay?" He walked slowly to the sofa and gazed at Elly for a moment. Then he followed the minister down the hall.

Dr. Sloane sat down wearily on a kitchen chair, motioned the policeman to another, and explained. Kogan, making notes, interrupted only once. "Let me get this straight. You didn't tell the kid about the accident right away?"

"No. I felt that the shock—I didn't want her to see the body."

But the question had startled Dr. Sloane and it gave rise to others. Was it true that he had been thinking only of Elly? Or had he wanted mainly to avoid a scene? If he had been sure of her love and trust, wouldn't he have gently broken the news to her at once? He shook off these confusing thoughts and grimly completed his account.

"That's tough," said Kogan, and went down into the cellar to see the kitten's body. On his return, his plump face was crinkled into a compassionate squint. "I know how you must feel. I got kids of my own." He scratched his nose. "Excuse me, Reverend, but is there a Mrs. Sloane?"

"No, I'm a widower."

"I see. Got somebody to make sure the kid's all right?"

"Yes, the doctor's coming—Henry Harris, in the Medical Building."

"Okay." Kogan put his notebook away. "Sorry I had to bother you. Hope the little girl gets over it fast. I know how it is with kids. They got to be loved all the time to make up for the rotten things that happen. It could just as easily have been one of mine. We got dogs and cats both."

At the front door, the policeman stopped and said in a low voice, "Listen, I can see where you wouldn't want some reporter to pick this up for a news story. A crank files a complaint, next thing it mushrooms into a rumor. In your business that wouldn't be good—always some people ready to believe the worst. I'll talk to the sergeant. He'll handle it."

As Kogan reached the sidewalk, an old but neat convertible drew up behind the police car and a young woman got out quickly. She was carrying a small kitten on one arm, holding it securely with her other hand. The kitten, mostly black, with a white chest, white paws, and a white nose, was miaowing lustily. The policeman got into the cruiser as Dr. Sloane descended the steps.

Miss Wylie wasn't much more than thirty, a small slender woman. She smiled. "Here we are, Dr. Sloane."

"Thank you for coming," he said.

Kogan leaned out of the window of the patrol car. "That the new kitten for the girl? Good idea." He drove away, and Miss Wylie looked curiously after him. Dr. Sloane felt constrained to explain the policeman's presence as they entered the house.

"You're having a bad day," Miss Wylie replied. She was a clear-skinned woman with high cheekbones, a wide mouth, and brown hair worn in a casual crop. "How's Elly?"

"Sleeping. In there on the sofa."

"What do you want me to do? Hush—" she whispered to the squalling kitten in her hands.

Elly moaned a little but did not wake. Sloane led Miss Wylie through to the kitchen. "I'd better tell you all about it," he said.

Repetition, he found, made the story no easier to relate. On hearing the way of the black kitten's death, Miss Wylie caught her lower lip with her teeth. But her intent brown eyes never ceased to study his face.

"Of course I'll stand by," she said, when she had heard him out. "I think the best thing would be to have the new kitten right in the room with Elly when she wakes up. I'll know what to say by how she reacts."

"You feel I'd better stay away?"

"Until she's prepared, yes." As if she felt this to be harsh, she added a word of reassurance. "Once she understands, she'll adjust quickly. They do at that age, thank heaven."

Behind his awareness of her, there was something gnawing at his mind. It came to him—a phrase the policeman, Kogan, had used: "They got to be loved all the time." Yielding to an impulse, he said abruptly, "Miss Wylie, I'd like to ask your opinion of Elly. As a personality, I mean. How does she strike you?"

She thought for an unsmiling second. "Elly seems a pretty stormy little girl inside."

"Stormy? You mean temperamental? Or bad-tempered?"

"I think perhaps unhappy. I've seen it in other children when they feel—rejected. They burst out, the way Elly often does, to get recognition."

He stared at her. "Rejection?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "You asked me."

The words, "Why, I love Elly," were on the tip of Dr. Sloane's tongue, but he suppressed them with the irritable reflection that he did not have to justify himself to this woman. At the same time, he had the disturbing impression that she was thinking much more than she was saying. He decided to challenge her.

"Miss Wylie," he said, "there's no doubt in your mind, is there, that it *was* an accident?"

With just the slightest hesitation, she replied, "I'm sure it was an accident."

They looked at each other, and he forced a smile. "I suppose the Freudians would say that the accident represented a subconscious intention on my part. Thank God I don't accept that."

She answered him carefully. "Yes, it's a rather terrifying idea."

He felt as if he had been struck. She believed, she actually believed that at some primitive level of his unconscious mind he had wished the kitten dead. But even while resentment worked in him, he couldn't help pursuing the notion with a kind of fascinated horror. Could some inner motive, unknown even to himself, have paralyzed his will while his right foot was in mid-air? Could he have stopped his foot from coming down on that little body? He shook his head angrily. "I loved that kitten," he said.

Her eyes widened at the intensity of his voice. "I'm sure you did."

With stiffened lips, he said, "You can carry psychoanalytic theory too far." His voice sounded shrill to his own ears, and he forced it lower. "Why," he said with an unsuccessful attempt at casualness, "if I accepted your view—"

"Please," she objected. "It's not my view."

He felt that he had to make himself understood. "Before the accident, I was feeling a little annoyed at Elly—grant that. Would you suggest that there was some psychological connection between that fleeting irritation and Sambo's death? Why, if I thought that, I'd have to regard myself as a spiritual criminal instead of a minister of God."

"You're exaggerating, aren't you?"

He leaned against the wall to conceal his tension. "Exaggerating? When you've practically accused me of murdering the kitten? Worse, of symbolically murdering my own daughter?"

"Dr. Sloane! I've accused you of nothing!" She rose, frowning, but her voice was full of concern. "You've been under great strain. Why don't you try to rest while I stay with Elly?"

He looked at her without answering. After a moment, she went into the living room, still carrying the black-and-white kitten, which had fallen asleep.

Dr. Sloane resisted an impulse to sit down and bury his face in his hands. In an effort to stop thinking, he forced himself into physical action: he went down into the cellar, put the dead kitten's body in a small box, took it out to the garden, dug a tiny grave, interred the cardboard box, and scooped back the loose dirt. He wanted to say some words for the vanished little life, but the only thing that came to him was an inward plea, stark and formless. "God, have mercy on all living things. Help us, oh help us, God."

Returning to the house, he found a sponge, filled a pail with water and detergent, and went upstairs. As he passed the living room, he saw that Elly was still sleeping, while Miss Wylie sat in a deep chair, the new kitten on her lap. Their eyes met, but they did not speak.

The hooked rug in the study showed a dark moist spot at its center, and he worked at it and at the stain on the wood below until he was satisfied that Elly would notice nothing.

When the job was finished, he felt very tired. He sat down at his desk and began to leaf through the pages of his unfinished sermon.

A sound from below reached him and he froze in his chair. It was Elly's voice, her small waking-up voice. But he couldn't make out the words. Then he heard Miss Wylie's murmur. There was a silence, and for one bottomless instant he waited for that terrifying scream. It did not come.

The warm womanly tones resumed. An impulse to go to the landing and listen was checked by an unaccountable feeling that he had no right—yet he was aware of being hopeful, of having shaken off despair.

A quick, strange thought came to him: the kitten had died for Elly and him, its blood had opened the way for his redemption. He wanted to take Elly into his arms, hold her tight, and tell her that she would never again want for love. He wanted to expiate with love his crime of not having loved enough.

With an abrupt movement, he flung the sermon into the wastebasket. The thing was a bore. He owed his congregation a message with more God in it than that.

The trouble with the sermon, he recognized, was that he had been thinking of crime in the abstract, as something remote from himself,

as something on the outside. Now what he wanted to talk about was the criminal within, the criminal lurking in the soul of every man—the hidden criminal whom only love can hold in check. And his heart would be in every word.

From below he heard a faint miaow, an exclamation from Elly, and Miss Wylie's cheerful laugh. Not since his wife's death, it occurred to him, had he heard a woman's laughter in this house. He stayed quiet, puffing at his pipe with a sense of growing serenity, waiting patiently now for Miss Wylie to call him.



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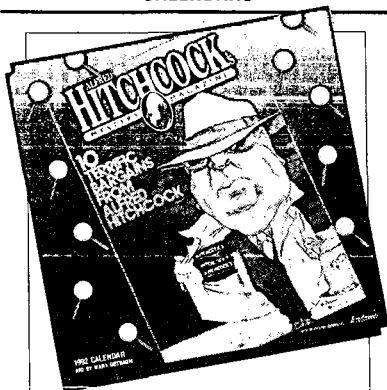
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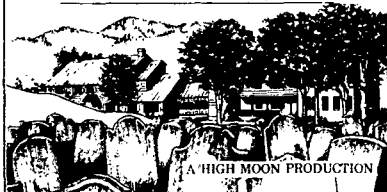
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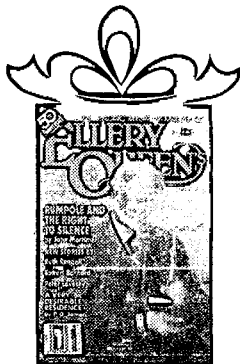
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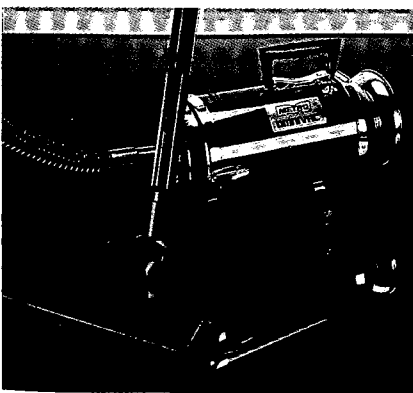
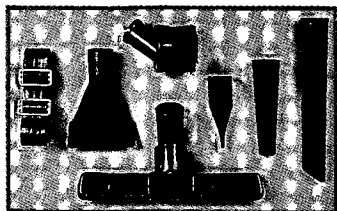
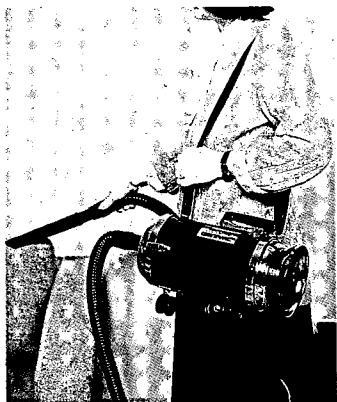
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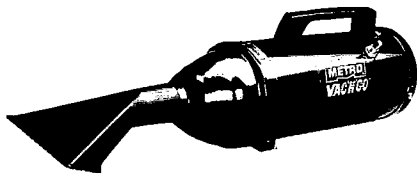
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The Omnivac® by Metro® is the portable canister vacuum cleaner/blower that simply blows away the competition. So compact (17 inches x 7 inches) and weighing only 11 pounds, it is a homemaker's dream. But don't let the compact size and portability fool you! The Omnivac® features an all-steel body and packs a full 4.0 peak h.p. 2-speed motor for incredible suction and deep cleaning power that is far superior to most ordinary vacuums. The turbo-driven powerhead attachment features a high speed rotating brush that removes ground-in carpet dirt as effectively as bulky upright models. Plus, its double swivel neck gets into tight spots under furniture and in corners. But it doesn't stop here! A reversible air blower provides 200 mph power for sweeping garages, patios, and walkways—and it inflates inflatables too. The Omnivac® can be carried easily over your shoulder with the comfortable shoulder strap or it can roll along effortlessly on its swivel caster wheels. The full-featured 10-piece accessory kit comes with a 6 foot hose, 2 extension wands, bi-turbo powerhead, nozzle, crevice tool, dust brush, floor/wall brush, inflator, powerizer, and shoulder strap. UL approved and made in the USA. And ... as if the Omnivac® weren't enough, we are pleased to offer **ABSOLUTELY FREE** with your order, the Vac 'N' Go, (a \$40 value) the high



performance ½ horsepower electric hand vacuum. Ideal for quick clean-ups around the house, office, workshop, or in the car, RV, or boat. Includes 110 volt power unit and Pik-all nozzle. Omnivac® attachments will also fit the Vac 'N' Go. Full one year warranty. **TWO GREAT VACUUMS — FOR ONE LOW PRICE!** Who can resist an offer like this??? **\$199.98** (\$20.00) #A1996.



A BI-TURBO BRUSH

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FOR ORDERING INFORMATION SEE BACK COVER.

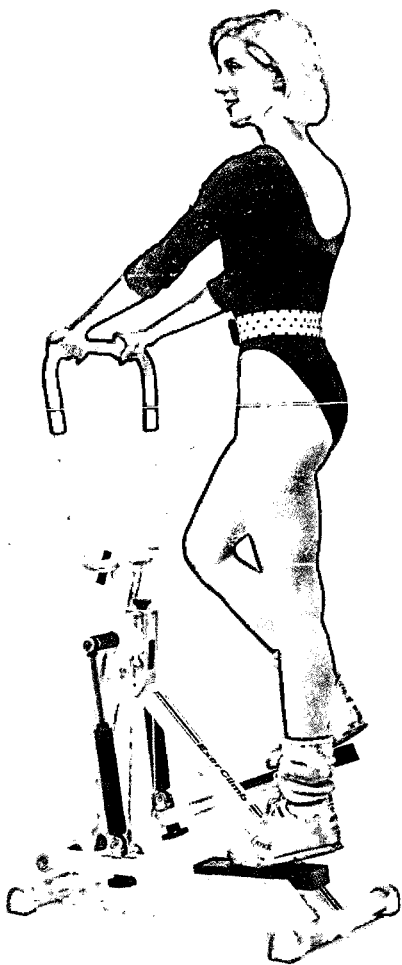
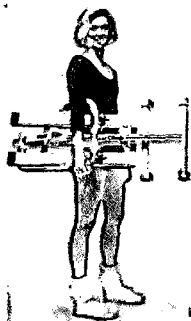
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7 STEP UP TO A HEALTHIER YOU

Doctors, physical trainers, and athletes agree that stair climbing is one of the best forms of aerobic exercise. You can achieve your fitness goals without the severe jarring or pounding associated with running or jogging. That's why the foldaway ExerClimb™ is the perfect piece of exercise equipment. The ExerClimb™ improves cardiovascular function, increases endurance, burns body fat, and conditions major muscle groups to tighten and tone upper body, thighs, hips, buttocks, and calves. And results can be seen with a twenty minute workout three times a week. It is quiet enough to let you exercise while watching TV. or listening to your favorite music. The hydraulic powered ExerClimb™ features sturdy steel construction, magnum series shocks and individual tension adjustment to insure a high intensity, low impact workout. Compact and lightweight (28 lbs.) this incredible machine fits in virtually any size room. When opened for use, it measures 28"H x 27"L x 16"W. Plus, its unique fold-away feature makes carrying and storage a snap. Perfect to take along to your office, trips, or almost anywhere. Some assembly

required, using only screwdriver and pliers. For all these great features, one would expect to pay much more, but the ExerClimb™ has a very trim price tag. So now there is no reason not to "step" into better shape. Ninety day warranty. **\$119.98** (\$15.00) #A1998.



TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in () payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, DEPT. 111 BL; PO. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or COD orders. **30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund.**